

Braced

by Foxy'sGirl

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Summary: Companion story/sequel to Chasing Thunderstorms. Sometimes the scaffolding can't all be internal. Rated for future lemons and probably language.

1. Chapter 1

****So I don't forget to say it at the bottom, I want to say Happy Birthday to my good friend and amazing second pair of eyes, Midoriko-sama! ****

****She's basically the reason that this story exists, and didn't die alone and cold in some lonely file on my computer. ****

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Black ice is a stupid phrase. It should be called clear ice, or invisible ice. 'Gets into all the cracks in the asphalt and ruins all possible traction' ice.

And today seemed like it might be good. Astrid managed to get out of bed without hammering on the snooze button enough times to incur Ruff's pillow throwing wrath. She has a paper due in her nine o'clock class and it's already edited and printed, waiting patiently in her backpack.

She only needed a two mile run. Two miles. Two miles is a stroll, it's Hiccup could do it. Hiccup could do it in the ice.

Hell, a ten year old could have done this run without parental permission.

It's not even a long run, or a fast one. A nonevent in the grand scheme of things.

One second she was rounding a corner onto her favorite downhill with that well-practiced easy lope, and the next her right knee wasn't underneath her anymore. It wrenched forward, seemingly disembodied as her foot careened into the curb and she pitched forward onto her hands. Looking back at the fall, there was a definite tearing noise shattering the barely dawn calm.

Like ripping a now invalid check and tossing it in the trash.

Astrid knew something was different the second she rolled over to sit on the sidewalk, an out of character whimper escaping as lightning bolts of pain shot out from her knee in all directions. Something about the deep twinge awakened instant nausea as the world spun out of focus around that scalding, angry epicenter.

Thirty hollow, ringing seconds later, the pain still hasn't passed and Astrid leans down, cautiously probing the sides of that cursed joint with gentle fingers. A panicked cry escapes at the contact and she jerks her hands back, quaking miserably with adrenaline and pain as the thing seems to swell before her eyes.

Maybe this day won't be so great after all.

It's a miracle in its own right that she has her phone zipped into her hoodie pocket. Hiccup has some horrible midterm tonight and he's been calling her right after waking up the past few mornings, asking pointless questions and being too manly to admit that he needs moral support.

She's been giving it anyway.

She hadn't wanted to miss his call and send him into some hyper-stressed wave of hysterics, and it strikes her that just five minutes ago she was irritated by the stiff weight bouncing against her hip with every step.

Something about five minutes ago is different, like she's already looking through one of those closed curtains she never seems to notice until it's too late.

She pulls the phone out with shaking fingers and hovers over Ruff's contact for a moment before grumbling to herself in inarticulate frustration.

How many times has this stupid knee acted up? She lost count of how many hours she spent in an ice bath at some point during her sophomore year of high school. It's just being a brat because it's cold out this morning.

It just hurts because she slipped. She has slipped before, it's not like this is anything new.

It's justâ€¦|bitching.

It already feels better, doesn't it? She pauses for a moment to focus on the pain, rather than the responding quaky throbbing in her head and stomach.

Ok, it doesn't feel better. It feels worse. She winces as a particularly sharp throb echoes in her gritted teeth and tries to

relax her jaw.

Walk it off. She has a meet in eight days. She needs to get her ass up, stop acting like a little girl, and walk this off.

After angrily stuffing her phone back into her pocket, she pushes to her left foot, using a tree near the sidewalk to pull herself vertical. The pain pools in her knee and she clutches at the bark with desperate fingernails as her vision prickles like a broken television.

Maybe she's not quite fine, per say. Meniscus tear? Maybe a pulled MCL?

So she'll miss her meet next Friday, but she'll be fine for Idaho, right?

The uncertainty bouncing around her head rubs every defiant fiber within her the wrong way and she takes a stubborn step forward. Her knee buckles the instant she puts any weight on it and she clings to the tree, groaning deep in her throat and squinting her eyes shut against the surge of queasiness.

She has to be fine, but she's not, is she? This might be bad.

Her hand is shaking almost uncontrollably as she pulls her phone back out of her pocket and looks again at Ruff's phone number. It feels like she's staring at the world from the other end of a long tube, light refracting ever so slightly wrong against her quaking field of vision. Like she's wearing glasses of just slightly the wrong prescription and her brain is floundering on the minute adjustments.

Ruff doesn't breathe for anyone before nine. Astrid is probably about to get her ass chewed out.

She presses send and holds the phone to her ear, the ringing melding with that dizzying echo inside her own head and she swallows thickly, trying not to puke, trying to think of anything but the way her leggings feel like they're groaning against the persistent swelling.

Torn meniscus, it's got to be. Or some kind of sprain from hell.

"What?" Ruff picks up with a bark on the fourth ring.

"Morning sunshine," Astrid greets, fumbling over her words with a foreign fragile tone that takes her aback. She coughs around what feels like a marble digging into the pack of her throat and a pained grunt escapes. Ruff sits up on the other end of the line with a too loud rustling of sheets, suddenly wide awake.

"Did you get hit by a car or something?" And the unkempt tenderness in the girl's usually rough voice is the last straw. Astrid grits her teeth against a horribly insistent sob climbing her throat, hopping to adjust her footing.

"My kneeâ€¦it went out," she admits like a shameful secret, and the joint shrieks at its mention, gleefully accepting the attention. "And

I need a ride."

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The athletic trainer's ceiling is boring. They should put posters up there or something, given how often people are stuck staring at the pocked foam.

The trainer, usually so helpful and upbeat, was a real downer today too. All gloom and doom and none of those Olympic jokes that never fail to make Astrid feel utterly legitimate. Now it's all, knee exercises that she should have been taught and careful arrangement of her leg on a stack of pillows, like it's a newborn kitten.

A newborn kitten that's not breathing.

Maybe it is the trainer's fault. Maybe if she'd known about the knee exercises she would have been stronger, and slipping wouldn't have yanked something crucial out by its roots. That's what it feels like anyway, she doubt that's what happened.

She slipped. Just slipped. You never hear about athletes hospitalized for a slip. You do hear about pretty college girls faking hurt on the field to run time down, but you never hear about them actually getting hurt.

Maybe she's faking. Maybe she's stressed and freaking out about the fact that it's the last semester of her undergrad, and she's getting her diploma in May, and there's only two papers left of her college career.

Maybe that's scary for some reason instead of exciting, and it's manifesting itself in some absolutely horrible and weak fake injury that's going to make her look like an idiot.

Maybe the pain will switch off, like a blown fuse, now that she's realized the core of the problem.

She's smart enough to know that theory is bullshit, but she clings to it, because it's the only thing that feels mildly realistic.

Tear. That's what the trainer mumbled under her breath, face grim as she looked back at Astrid and repeated the word as half of a phrase that won't quite coagulate.

ACL tear.

She doesn't care what anyone says, this is probably just a sprain.

Waiting here is boring, they should just let her go back to school. Ruff is turning in her homework for her, but that makes her more nervous than relieved. What if Ruff insults a teacher, which is sort of likely, or what if this somehow leaks through the cracks of her roommate's mental vault, and everyone end up knowing?

Right now, it's some sort of silent secret, preserved in a tight circle of intelligence, and the longer it stays that way, the smaller it is, right? Once something gets out to the world at large, it really might as well be true.

She's been in the small scale public eye for years. In high school, she fed off of the publicity, but ever since, people have wanted more of her and she's strived to keep it quiet. Hell, after Worlds, _Nike_ was trying to get her to advertise for them.

God, that would have stripped away the privacy.

It would have voided her scholarship anyway, and she wanted that last season, but now she's wondering if that wasn't the best choice. What if _next_ time, her knee really does go out? Her bank account is depressing, and Nike's numbers were larger than life.

She should call them before this gets out, if it ever does. She can see it now, on the phone, about to sign something when the TV blares in the background:

Breaking news, Astrid Hofferson laid out with some as of yet mysterious knee injury.

Astrid's eyes flicker between her utterly uninteresting phone and the even more boring ceiling, trying to think about anything but the disturbingly new throbbing in her knee. She should text Hiccup. Hiccup would want to know. She didn't even get to see him last weekend because he was so busy cramming.

But her knee isâ€|

Small circle. Small circle.

She repeats it like a mantra in her head, wishing that the trainer had thought to shut the door on the way out. The air in here does feel awfully thin though, inadequate to suppress and diffuse the rushing pain and melancholic stupor seeping through her body.

Thisâ€|what if this is bad?

She's seen team members get injured, she remembers sitting in the hospital and hearing about Hiccup's leg for the first time. There's a special tone that people use, the same tone from medical shows when the unreasonably good looking intern has to inform someone that their family member is dead. That overwhelmingly gentle professionalism that makes the victim feel dainty and ancient all at once, protected and abandoned in equal parts.

Hospitals, MRI's. No one has mentioned the meet in Idaho. She's smart enough to glean that it's not happening, but the fact that no one has even mentioned it to her makes everything worse.

If she doesn't make it to Idaho, she's going to have to make a hell of an impression in the two weeks after it to even be considered for the national team. Can she get it back that fast? No one has said anything about getting back in shape.

Maybe it'll be easy. Maybe her knee will knit itself back together over a lazy week, and she'll be out on the track by next weekend, and no one will really be the wiser.

A vacation. A mental health leave.

It's probably not going to go like that, is it?

She sighs, swallowing whatever pride she has left and dialing. The phone rings twice and someone picks up.

"Astrid?" Hiccup's father asks, voice tainted with fatherly concern that doesn't make her quite as uncomfortable as it used to.

"Hey Jerry," she pauses, wondering exactly how she should phrase this. Of course the words escape in a clumsy rush that would make Hiccup proud. "I slipped and messed up my knee pretty badly, and I need to go to a hospital."

"Are you alright?"

"Noâ€¦maybe not," she admits with a heavy sigh, free fingers absently clenching around the hem of her jacket. "It'sâ€¦the trainer says it might be my ACL." The wound throbs delightedly as it's mentioned, a horrible alien clawing.

Attention whore.

They asked about her pain level when she hopped in, leaning harder than she should have on Ruff's arm, and she said it was a seven. It's probably more like an eight now, and it peaks above that when she thinks about everything it could mean.

What does that pain scale mean anyway? Could she really comprehend what's supposed to be a ten? She imagines it's something like the dead heavy throbbing when she first saw that dreadful absence of Hiccup's foot. Something akin to that level of heartache, that all-consuming pain that means nothing is alright and nothing is ever going to be normal again.

A ten must be permanent pain.

"Ohâ€¦Astrid," Gerard's voice sounds like Ruff's and her trainer's, and like the whispers leaking around the doorway when anyone recognizes her reclined on the seat. It's not the first time that people have harbored that misconception that she's delicate, but it might be the first instance that she's ever considered agreeing with them.

Frustrated, stinging tears pool at the back of her eyes and she sniffs indignant and embarrassed, absolutely miserable that Gerard is hearing her. She swallows and exhales in a measured stream, fiddling with a string unravelling from the sleeve of her jacket.

"Itâ€¦can you come get me? Thisâ€¦it hurts." The confession rings in her ears and she envisions Hiccup on the other end of the line, understanding beyond judgment. She thinks he gets that from his father, that urge to care for things and leave people better than he found them. "Please?"

Before this, pain has always made her angry, brought out some inner animal full of pride and insistently avoiding any sort of injured honesty. This is worse, this is deeper, altering in that horrible way that muddles the immediate horizon. She remembers asking Hiccup for help back in her darkest days, please landing on her lips like a

foreign language.

She leaned on him back then, no matter how pathetic it was.

She doesn't know if anything has ever hurt this bad before.

"I'll leave right now," his urgency melts out of some sort of stuttering shock, and she wishes she hadn't admitted anything. She knows everyone is worried, but hearing it in Gerard's voice is more stressful than anything yet. "Are you with the trainer until then?"

At least Ruff agreed to turn in her paper.

"Oh yeah," she shrugs as if somehow the location really does make this less horrible or shocking. "I'm at the athletic complex. They gave me Tylenol and I'm icing butâ€" her voice catches in her throat, "but it's notâ€|pleasant."

Her braggart of a knee pumps its fist victoriously against her nerve endings.

"I'll call the hospital on the way so that they'll be ready for you." It's unspeakably wonderful to have someone else take control, someone stronger than she can be right now. It's nice to have that authority on her side even when nothing else seems to be.

"Alright, I'll see you in a bit."

Astrid spends her entire half-hour laying as still as she can manage, teeth gritting of their own accord while she debates whether she should tell Hiccup.

It could still be a sprain, couldn't it? It could still be something smaller, a torn meniscus or maybe just her MCL. There's no need to interrupt Hiccup for a sprain he'sâ€|he'sâ€|

He'll worry, he'll drop whatever he's doing and come to see her and everything will be real and absolutely horrible all at once. If anyone knows how tough she is, it's Hiccup and if he acknowledges thisâ€|herâ€|it's so real it could suffocate her.

But she wants that comfort. She wants someone to hold her hand and not bother to tell her that everything will be alright. She wants a snarky shoulder to lean on, and to distract her, she wants those soft, caring fingers that have never been anything but tender. He's dealt with her knee before, patching up scares so old they're now completely faded, back when he wasn't supposed to touch her.

She wants to cry.

And her teamâ€|can they win without her? It sounds conceited, but it's not. She's worked hard to be one of those integral cogs, and all that pride she took in moving the machine forward suddenly seems misplaced and too large for only her shoulders. She'll be back at least in some capacity, right? And soon. It'll be soon.

This is probably just a sprain.

Just a horrible, horrible sprain.

Astrid wishes the trainer would come back and change her ice, something to give her a reason to buck up and ignore the pain spreading up into her fatigued hip, cramped from trying to hold her leg together from the inside. The only thing better than a reason to suck it up would be that singular Hiccup reason to let everything out.

Her thumbs start blazing across her keypad of their own accord, typing out a behemoth of a message.

She tells him that she fell, and her knee might not be ok this time. That the trainer is throwing around words like ACL, and no one is mentioning meets or therapy, or walking it off. She tells him that she's scared and that his dad is picking her up, and that she really, honestly hopes he does well on his test.

Her resolve to leave him out of this doubles with that last point and she deletes the message.

It's not like she won't still be hurt when he's done.

Unless she's in a psychiatric ward for delusions. Slips don't hurt this bad, she could definitely still be going crazy.

She quickly types that he'll be fine and that she loves him, hitting send and setting her phone against her clammy stomach. Her eyes slip shut, mind exhausted with the effort of tuning out that persistent throbbing. After an indeterminable amount of time, a hand lands on her shoulder and she jolts, trying to sit up and wincing when her whole leg twitches. Jerry jerks his hand back at her pained expression, backpedaling to stand closer to the door.

"Oh, erâ€¦sorry," he stands sheepishly at arm's length and Astrid grits her teeth, pushing onto her elbows. It's obvious that Gerard is staring at her knee, purple below her rolled up sweatpants and almost twice its normal size. She shifts, pushing the cuff of her pants back down and shuddering when her shaking fingers brush against the joint. "No, sit still," he steps forward at her quiet whimper, and it's every time Hiccup tried to get up off of the couch when he was still on crutches.

"I want to get out of here," she tries to snap but it comes out softer and she flushes with pain and embarrassment, grunting as she sits fully and drags her useless leg over the edge of the cot.

Faith feels like the only thing holding her leg together as her foot swings imperceptibly, sending lightning bolts of pain up her spine. For a moment, the mint green room is lost in swirling fuzz and then she's leaning forward into a big, warm hand on her shoulder.

She blinks and glowers at the floor, partially eclipsed by her sympathetically swollen ankle.

"Do youâ€¦" His tone is horrifically gentle.

"I can walk with crutches, they said I can walk with crutches." Well, they said that she might be able to, but she absolutely refuses to let go of that little smidgen of freedom.

Once Hiccup finds out, she's not going to have freedom for weeks. Even if she's better before then.

He's not going to let her go to the bathroom alone.

Fuck, could she go to the bathroom alone?

"Are you sure?"

"You sound like your son," she scowls at him, slipping down onto her good foot and hopping unsteadily. Ruff's impossibly dented crutches are leaning against the wall and she leans towards them, arms too short. "Hand me those."

Jerry is smart enough not to offer to carry her.

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Astrid should care that she's in a hospital gown in front of Hiccup's father, or the more important fact that she hasn't asked the man to leave. Her knee looksâ€|bulging, but fine. Nothing about the slightly pudgy and purple appearance of the joint suggests the pain and she wonders again if she's just going soft.

The swelling went down in the car too. The pain went up, but it's not like psychosomatic pain follows physical rules.

It's been more swollen than this before. Hell, back in high school it would blow up like a balloon if she offended its finicky tastes by warming it up a minute less than it would have liked.

Her trainer just must be an idiot, sending her to the hospital for this. It's hardly a sprain, just look at it.

She's a big baby. If she'd just bucked up and ran home, it would be stretched out and fine. Now it's just tight and obnoxious because she didn't cool down.

She's an idiot.

This is her fault.

"How is it feeling?" Gerard asks from the chair in the corner, outwardly jittery in that way that can only mean he's remembering the last time he was in the hospital waiting for news on an injured leg.

She sympathizes, and all that deeply morbid corner of her brain can think is that they're going to amputate.

Hey, she and Hiccup would match.

"I'll live," she tries to laugh, but her voice is tight and grim in her throat, insisting it's somehow smarter than the rest of her. Really, it's probably more arrogant than it is a harbinger, and it's trying to convince her back into that pathetic self-pity that got her here in the first place. "I'm starting to think this is all overkill anyway. It's probably just a sprain."

Gerard nods warily.

"It's best to be sure," he cautions too gently, and Astrid rolls her eyes, drawing strength from the surliness.

"Look at it," she gestures to the elevated knee, ignoring the fact that when she wiggles her toes they respond with irritating jolts of pain. "It's been worse before."

"Astrid, have I ever told you about my senior football season in college?" He phrases it carefully, avoiding _last_ and _end_ like potent curses.

"Please tell me this is about a Rose bowl you never told me that you won," Astrid laughs, eyebrows furrowed anxiously behind the diversion that's so obviously Hiccup's influence that the man's paternal instincts kick into high gear.

"Got sacked mid-pass in the first round of the play-offs," he can laugh at the memory now, but the bitter disappointment still hovers over the back of his tongue, the gateway to that untraveled road taunting him. "My shoulder was never the same, I never even got back up to my peak bench weight," he laments and Astrid scowls at him, even as her eyes fret.

"It's a sprain," she insists, "and if I knew you were going to be so _upbeat_, I would have called Hiccup to treat me like an invalid."

She doesn't need anyone nagging at her to be careful, or to think about the situation, when her knee reminds her of its gravity with every heartbeat.

She wishes Hiccup were here.

"Have you let him know?"

"I feel dumb enough calling you about what is obviously just a sprain, and he has a midterm tonight," she bites her lip and nods to herself, preoccupied. "Or maybe it's a torn meniscus, but probably not bad. That's only a couple of weeks recovery time."

Gerard stares grimly at the wall, relieved and disappointed when he can't bring himself to be the bearer of bad news. Astrid is tough as nails, always has been. Last summer she tripped on barbed wire and cut her shin almost through to the bone.

Any normal person would have stopped, but she ran home, complaining to him about her time while rinsing her blood soaked sock and plucking rust flakes out of the gash with a pair of tweezers. Hiccup almost fainted at the sight of her humming to herself and butterfly clipping the skin together, evidently unperturbed.

Gobber is full of stories about Astrid not knowing when to stop. About blisters the size of silver dollars on pacing runs and bleeding from under toenails because she tied her shoes too tightly.

The fact that she didn't pick herself up and run home is evidence enough that this is more than a sprain.

The doctor is in the room five minutes later, narrowly avoiding a

wicked punch when Astrid reacts violently to the onslaught of renewed pain. He shakes his head grimly at Gerard when she's not looking, ordering an immediate MRI.

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"What do you mean it's my ACL?" Astrid asks, beyond frustrated as she pushes up to her elbows and grimacing as even that completely unrelated motion sends a bolt of stabbing pain through her knee. "I was running, I'm a runner. It's not even a pivoting sport. It can't be my ACL."

This is the trainer's fault for being right. It's Gerard's fault for forcing her to go through with going to the hospital. It's—It's—it's this dumb doctor's fault for speaking to her like she's stupid or about to cry.

"Astrid," the doctor says her name gently, like it's something fragile that will shatter on his tongue, and her face flushes angrily. "If you look at the MRI," he points again to that infernal image, where everything under her patella is lit up like the Fourth of July, "you can see—"

"I don't want to look at the MRI," no matter how fierce she sounds, it occurs to her that she's whining, and she snarls. "Where is it?" He shows her the clearly torn ligament again, tracing a pale finger to another suspect zone, lit up bright fuchsia.

"Your PCL appears to be stressed too, and this swelling could indicate a cluster of micro-tears, probably something around a Grade 1 sprain," and it's so clinically simple, the shredded tendons that she can't wrap her mind around. "You've had problems with this knee before, right?"

She nods, and the action reeks of understood permanence. But she doesn't understand. She doesn't understand how this happened, or how this perfectly normal morning ended up like this. She doesn't understand anything.

"Always. It's always been—finicky," the responsible adult hidden deep inside the distraught young woman answers in a monotone, and the doctor points to something else on that too bright photo.

"You have a thin part of the meniscus here," she can't really see what he means, can't see anything but the wreckage an inch away. And it hurts. It all hurts too much to concentrate, but not bad enough to justify crying in this room full of grown men. "It's probably congenital, but it rocked your femur forward on the joint, and when you tried to correct your balance backwards, the joint twisted."

That noise like tearing paper echoes in her memory and she swallows hard, trying not to gag. She wishes Hiccup were here. She wishes Jerry would stop looking at her like she's about to explode or cry or kill someone.

She feels like a mountain lion that's been hit by a car. Everyone stops to stare, and says how sad it is, but no one actually helps.

Or a wolf, she guesses they get the same treatment.

"What's the plan of action then?" Gerard asks after Astrid sits silent and gaping a moment too long, face uncharacteristically pasty.

"Because of the PCL, I do want to repair the ACL surgically, her other tendons can't pick up the slack right nowâ€|"

Astrid zones out entirely, staring at the ceiling and trying to absorb all of these words she doesn't want to hear. Surgery. Tendon grafts. Physical therapy. She was on the other end of this years ago, listening to the doctor while Hiccup zoned out, adjusting to a new reality.

It feels horrible to say, but she envies Hiccup here. He woke up to a different world rather than weathering the transition, watching the world morph and change. He didn't see his life alter, he winked out before it was solid, before anything lost was permanent.

No Regionals this year.

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**Soâ€|bit of a rough start for Astrid here. I know this starts out dark, but I promise that it does get better from here. **

**Also, I ended up doing so much research on knee injuries in college age female athletes, which is a surprisingly large body of information, so I can actually attest that anything I describe is very possible and accurate. **

**Please tell me what you guys think! I am more nervous than normal posting this, for some reason. I guess two months is long enough for me to lose all that nerve. **

2. Chapter 2

**Holy Crap, the response to the first chapter was amazing. Thank you all for your reviews and favorites and follows and encouragement! **

**From here on out, I'm going to normalize into a Sunday/Wednesday posting schedule, so Chapter 3 will be out on Sunday, April sixth. **

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Hiccup is both exhausted and bolstered driving into the garage at ten thirty that night, because it's one of those rare and beautiful days where cramming for a week was absolutely worth it. Toothless and Spike greet him at the door and he lets the wolf jump up, huge paw on his shoulder and primed for a hug. Hiccup scratches Spike's head and walks forward slowly, laughing as Toothless totters backwards on his hind feet like a horrible ballerina, smiling with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

Hiccup stops short of the kitchen, staring at Astrid, who is reclined on the couch with her right foot elevated, knee buckled into a bulky

brace.

Ok, this midterm must have finally done him in. Astrid is at school, not icing her knee on his couch. His dad looks up from the TV and spots him, heaving out of his easy-chair and hustling quietly to the kitchen.

Astrid must be asleep or a hallucination, because she hasn't looked his way.

"What?..." Hiccup starts as soon as his dad gets close enough, but his exact question is lagging behind in his test-exhausted brain. What is Astrid doing here? Why is her knee or leg elevated?

Why is only figuring about all of this now? How long has she been here?

"She didn't want to tell you because of your test," his father starts, voice hushed as he ushers Hiccup into the kitchen. "How did that go, anyway?"

"Fine, thanks for asking," and the sentiment is genuine until he remembers Astrid prone and slightly sallow on the couch. "But what's going on?"

Gerard gestures for a moment, mouth moving soundlessly as he tries to figure out how to phrase everything. Astrid probably isn't in the best form to know right now, because when the hospital gave her pain killers for the night, it appears that they forgot to take into account that she's barely a hundred pounds.

It turns out that Astrid loathes feeling groggy.

Angry Astrid on downers isn't great company.

Jerry hasn't been so terrified of a woman since Val caught him smashing a wolf spider with the Sunday newspaper and yelled at him for an hour about the inside ecosystem and how they were going to have fly problems now and that spider wasn't doing anything to him anyway so why did he have to go killing things?

He refocuses on Hiccup and wonders why his boy's nature ever shocked him.

"She slipped on her run this morning, and messed up her knee pretty badly," Gerard steps forward as Hiccup blanches and leans on the counter, looking every bit as worried as Astrid feared he would be. Toothless noses at his boy's hand and Spike sits warily in the doorway, worried to leave Astrid but not wanting to be left out of the conversation.

"Is she alright?" Hiccup asks, remembering every time she talked about that knee. Every time she's spent the weekend limping around after a meet, whining about having to take a few days off.

"It's pretty serious," and the man doesn't really need to say anything else, because the truth is carved into the grim lines of his forehead. "It's her ACL, and maybe a damaged PCL too, they won't know about that until they get her into surgery tomorrow"

"Tomorrow?" Hiccup cuts his dad off. "Why didn't you let me know about this?"

"I was dealing withâ€¦" he gestures to the couch vaguely. Hiccup smiles to himself, because no matter how worried he is, he can acknowledge what an awful patient his girlfriend happens to be. When she has the flu, she thinks she's dying, and the only way to get cold medicine into her is to slip it into her food and pray she doesn't see you escaping .

"Right, I'd almost forgotten how _fun_ sick Astrid is. What time tomorrow?" Hiccup asks, the surprise suspended exhaustion slapping him in the face.

"They want her there at 2:30."

"Alright, I got it."

"She's not very patient with the crutches," his dad warns like he just spent the day learning the quirks of some wild animal. Hiccup bites his tongue from reminding his dad of the time he threw out his back when he insisted on carrying a new bathtub to the second floor of the house rather than hiring a contractor.

Hiccup suggested a back brace and would have gotten yelled out of the house if it didn't hurt his father to breathe.

"I got it," Hiccup repeats. "I wish I'd known earlier, butâ€¦" he sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, I can get tomorrow off of school. It's only one class."

"She thought it'd mess up your test if she told you," Gerard says in Astrid's defense and her disgruntled boyfriend grins.

"She's probably right, but don't tell her that."

"I'm going to bed if you're sure you can handle itâ€¦and if I were you, I'd just leave her on the couch overnightâ€¦she's a little _cranky_ right now," his father warns and Hiccup cocks his head.

"Does it hurt that bad?" How bad would something have to hurt to perturb _Astrid_ that much?

"She's got some pretty big pills to get her through, but it was pretty bad," the man is sheepish, waiting for that anxious anger that Hiccup reserves for Astrid and the wolf.

The younger man grinds his jaw and swallows, loathing the fact that Astrid spent all day thinking about his test of all things. God, she probably sent him that text from the hospital, perking him up when he should have been there with her.

She spent days on end curled up next to his hospital bed, everyone told him how far she disappeared from the world when he was under.

"Goodnight dad," Hiccup waves his father off absently and walks back towards Astrid's couch, vowing not to bring anything controversial up tonight.

Like the fact that she didn't tell him that she was in the hospital.

Nothing perturbing like that.

She appears to be sleeping, eyes closed and breathing slow and even under the blanket across her chest. Her expression is a little off-kilter, tired and pinched, and Hiccup wonders if she's being at all honest about how much this hurts.

He rests his hand on her forehead, lightly sweeping her bangs to the side. She blinks at him, bleary eyed and scowling at the light before softening and smiling at him, still pained but relaxing. He should have been there, she would have relaxed earlier if he'd just been there.

Toothless noses encouragingly at the back of his legs, pressing him forward towards the couch. Spike growls at his proximity, nervous at her girl's condition.

"Hey, how'd your test go?" The question tugs his heart in two directions at once, and he appreciates the support as much as he regrets letting her know that he was stressed. "Better than my day, I hope."

"Come on," he smiles softly, because it's hard to be mad with those bleary and unquestionably needy blue eyes staring up at him. "You did get to go to the hospital and get poked."

"So fun," she laughs, shifting to get up and giving in with an ungainly flop onto the pillow propped behind her head. "I was going to sit up and make room for you, but I guess that's not happening," she grumbles, irritated with the world in general.

"Does this work?" He asks, carefully lifting her head and sliding underneath her pillow, settling her head back onto his lap so gently that it does all sorts of undignified things to Astrid's admittedly drugged stomach. She wiggles her shoulders against his thigh, wincing slightly as it jiggles her knee.

"This is fine," her eyes close again as his hand rests on her ribs, stroking gently through her tee-shirt. Upon a second glance, he recognizes it as one of his and his heart throbs earnestly in his chest.

She should have called him. He would have come.

"Do you want to talk about anything?" He asks after a quiet minute, failing to get interested in the food network droning in the background.

"Not really," she shrugs, twitching as her bangs tickle the bridge of her nose. Hiccup pushes the errant hairs back and rests his warm palm on her forehead. "I did wish you were there earlier, by the way," he smiles in spite of the situation at the honesty. "I almost punched the doctor and I couldn't concentrate at all when they were showing me the scans," she frowns, "so you better have aced that test."

"I think I did," he nods to himself and she looks something past smug

as her oh-so-brilliant plan proves itself. "But next time you end up in the hospital, I'd like it if you actually, you know, told me."

"I don't know if there's going to be a next time," she grumbles, leaning into his touch as his fingers stroke along her cheekbone. Toothless snuffles at her left foot, licking her toes with a wide, warm tongue before laying down next to Spike by the foot of the couch.

This is too much for even the triple team of comfort.

"I missed out on your only hospital adventure?" It falls flat as a joke, because absolutely none of this is funny, but leaching his worry out onto her is only going to piss her off. She's too warm on top of him, slightly clammy sweat chilling against her scalp.

"It might be the big one," she hedges, when she knows the might is absolutely unnecessary.

It is the big one.

The only injury worth remembering is the last one.

The ending of something indefinable and huge looms like the last fifty pages of a good book when it becomes evident that there's no way all loose ends will be cinched together in time.

It's allâ€|everyone's fault. Why wasn't Hiccup there? Why did his stupid teacher make his stupid test today? Why didn't she come down to keep him company while he studied, and avoid that icy run altogether?

Her eyes blink open, glancing past the pool of blankets piled on top of her and down to that unfamiliar, tight, and clunky knee brace that's holding her foot in the air at a stiff angle. How long is it going to take to get used to that?

Is it going to be there long enough to get used to?

That's more horrifying than anything else, the fact that she might be standing in the doorway of some new state of being. One that involves knee braces and pain killers before running and freedom.

His hand slides under her neck and rubs in soothing circles, practically forcing her to relax bonelessly into the pillow.

"Thuggory thought it was hilarious to hit on the TA proctoring the test," Hiccup starts with a chuckle, hoping to distract her. Her eyes latch onto his, and he continues, fingers still kneading her neck. "She's probably grading the tests too, it wasn't a smart move."

"What did he say?" Astrid snorts, craning her neck to the right and giving him better access to a knot settled into the side of her muscle. His fingers find it and she groans, enthusiastically appreciative.

"He asked for some private tutoring on conductive heat transfer, " Hiccup laughs and Astrid opens her eyes, frowning at him.

"Because I totally know what that is," she snaps, chemically groggy brain irrationally irritated at being left behind.

"Conductive heat transfer is heat passing between surfaces that are touching," he clarifies and Astrid thinks for a moment before grinning.

"And how was that received?"

"I don't know, they were still talking when I left," his fingers stroke her hair back from her face, gentle and ticklish against her forehead, and she blinks slowly, melting even further against him.

"I bet Thugs is getting laid," she proclaims with a sleepy leer.

"You've been spending too much time with Ruff," it should be sickening when he taps her nose with the tip of his finger, but an uninhibited wave of warmth spreads through her like a whiskey burn.

She wrinkles her nose and slides her palm up his chest, hooking it around the back of his neck and tangling it in the too long hair there. He'd smile if he could get over the bleary glaze in her eyes.

Astrid isn't supposed to be as docile like this.

"Well, I couldn't spend any time with you because you ditched me for your heat transfer book," she pats his cheek, humorously condescending, before settling her hand against his jaw and stroking her thumb through the too-busy-to-shave stubble that's almost long enough to be soft.

"I think Thuggory probably screwed himself," Hiccup muses as her thumb glides clumsily across his lower lip, its usual confidence lost to whatever she took.

"I don't know, he does have that whole dimples thing going on," she shrugs and Hiccup sits up straighter, neglected protective side flowing into some inner source of manliness and puffing up his chest.

"Do I have the dimples thing?" He asks warily and she rolls her eyes, hand sliding back down his front to rest limply in her own lap.

Being an invalid, like everything else, is improved by Hiccup's involvement.

"Eh, not my thing," she assures him with a cavalier shrug that pulls on her knee like stabbing a hot poker into the joint. The medicine helps her not mind so much. "But a lot of girls are into it."

"If that's not your thing, then what is?" He asks, torn between curiosity and the need to distract her without frustrating her, lacing his fingers with hers on her stomach. She squeezes his hand, still scarily strong.

"This weekâ€" "

"This _week_?"

"Yes, this week it's probably beards," she finishes, staring up at his chin and barely holding in another scalding shrug.

"Beards? But you're the one always nagging me to shave," he reminds her indignantly and she rolls her eyes.

"Stubble is not my thing. But you're past the stubble." She reaches up again to rub her unclaimed hand across his jaw and he genuinely grins.

She remembers being shocked when after a few days in the hospital, Hiccup's jaw was completely overgrown with prickly auburn. Not that she ever cared, he was in a coma and his grooming was sort of the last thing on anyone's mind, but he just didn't look like a guy who could grow a full beard.

That was back when he was still skinny and boyish, bandaged leg a poorly hidden elephant in the room while she tried to justify waiting next to him. The nurses started shaving him after about a week, but she sort of missed the shadow. It made him look less like a boy plucked by God on a bad draw and more like a man who fought so hard to defend what he loved.

"So, what's going to be your thing next week?" He asks casually, leaning his chin into her touch.

"I don't know. If I knew, it would be my thing now."

"Do you have a new thing every week? Like 'Oh, it's been seven days, better find something else to like'?" He laughs.

"It keeps missing you interesting," she explains. "If I'm looking forward to something specific it makes the time go by faster."

"Maybe I should start doing that," he smiles at her reasoning, squeezing her hand in his.

"Don't bother. It looks like I'm going to be here for a while." They both glance down at her knee. "No offense, but I wish I could be back at school, you know?"

It's somehow less futile than wishing this stupid thing hadn't happened. Generically wishing to reset the morning seems less desperate, less harried and misplaced.

It's not about her knee, it's about her day, wasted in hospitals when she has a paper due next week. It's about bothering people with her dumb ass injury that she's never going to live down.

It's not about deploring the fact that her wonderful life is trying to shift underneath her. And it's actually wonderful this time, she's not a deluded teenager clinging to popularity above substance.

She has everything she could ever want.

Has. Had.

"I wish you could be back at school too," Hiccup agrees simply.

He gets the whole couch when she's gone. No one flips the breaker with their hairdryer when he's trying to shave in the morning. He can have quiet whenever he wants it, and doesn't have to pause every two seconds until Astrid is done play-growling at Spike while they wrestle on the floor like littermates.

He'd rather be so stifflingly lonely and have her be ok somewhere else, than sit here with a wrongly downed Astrid in his lap.

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"I've never had surgery before," Astrid admits, left leg jiggling nervously against the hospital bed. She looks impossibly younger, tired anxious eyes rimmed with dark circles and long blonde hair in a low ponytail at the nape of her neck. She slept on the couch last night, with Spike curled on the floor under her drooping hand. Hiccup stayed with her for a while, watching movies, until she encouraged him to go to bed because someone has to be in their right mind for her surgery.

Hiccup reaches out and grabs her twitching hand, holding it still in his.

"You'll be fine," he comforts her. She won't even be awake for it. She won't even realize it's happening.

He is smart enough not to say any of those things, because if anyone understands those hospital nerves it's him. He remembers so many bland afternoons wasted staring at mottled white tile and waiting for some awful new piece of information that'd ground him or send him through another round of therapy.

"I still have my _wisdom_ teeth," she laughs nervously, squeezing his hand too tight.

"Well, it shows, you're so wise" Hiccup compliments her wryly, receiving an eye-roll and a bracing squeeze that grinds his knuckle bones together. He hides his wince behind a cough as her left foot slips off of the bed, shaking nervously.

"And it's bad enough that they're going into my knee," she stares at the joint, letting it know just how offensive it truly is. Stupid knee. Stupid, useless, knee. This is all her dumb knee's fault. At least Hiccup's foot had the decency to leave, instead of mocking him from the end of his leg. "But I've neverâ€¦ have you ever been put under?" She asks, voice shrinking in her throat.

"For my wisdom teeth," he ignores the scared undertone in her voice and she loves him all the more for it. "But the nurse made sure I had plenty of laughing gas first." Astrid grins at that, still obviously uncomfortable.

"Do they really make you do the counting down thing?" She prods him further, "because I really don't like the idea that I'm suddenly not

going to be able to count down from ten. I'm not an idiot."

"I think that's how they know that you're actually asleep," he takes her hand in both of his and squeezes comfortingly. "You stop counting and they know that you aren't going to freak out when they startâ€" cutting. He stops himself just in time and swallows hard.

She'll be fine. Of course she'll be fine.

"They don't need to mock my counting skills to make sure I'm asleep."

"No one is mocking your counting skills," Hiccup assures her a little too pedantically, earning a glare.

Astrid looks back at her toes, bluish from the overnight constriction of the brace and generally unhealthy looking. Her left foot swings freely, toes hooking on the frame of the cot and squeezing the metal bar between them, relishing in the innate strength of her grip. It's always been easy, she's always been healthy.

And she still is, mostly. It's the bruise on the surface of an otherwise pristine apple, causing everyone to throw it back in the bin rather than give it a shot.

Even Hiccup can't imagine how this feels. He woke up in the aftermath, when everything was healed and new, like the world had passed into some new reality without his consent. She has as little consent as he did, but she has to watch, she has to see everything fall apart in front of her eyes.

Will she ever break a 4:45 mile again? She did it last summer, because Gobber said she couldn't. It was a late night drinking thing, Hiccup was asleep and she was up with Gerard and her old coach, and somehow discussion got around to Roger Bannister and impossible times. First her coach ribbed her for never breaking five in high school, and she retorted that five is no big deal. He proposed 4:45, and a wager of twenty dollars.

Astrid insisted it wouldn't be a problem and Gobber laughed in her face, sputtering and knocking his mouth against his bottle so hard he almost chipped a tooth.

She did it the next morning at her high school track, hung over and miserable with Hiccup holding that blue stopwatch and yawning every two seconds. It was a spite record, and nothing she's set since has felt anywhere near as victorious.

Of course she's done it since then, she even managed a four thirty nine mile split when she won the 3000 at worlds. It was practically a party trick, one she'd whip out the day before competitions to scare the other teams sharing the track.

But then her coach started putting her on the fifteen hundred, and she started losing the five thousand and...

There's really no use dwelling on that now, is there?

It's already gone even if it doesn't feel like it yet. This surgery is going to fix what she mangled, but from here on out she's like a

vase glued back together, not quite as water tight, not quite as reliable. The vase that stays in the kitchen because it's too horrible to throw it away, because it's grandma's vase or some sort of souvenir from a first date, but no one ever brings it down anymore.

It's gone, and she wants to try to get it back. She really does. She wants to be some sort of wunderkind, and spring up from the operating table, surging through physical therapy and finishing out some of what's left of her season.

That's not going to happen. All that's going to happen is a whole lot more pain, and a lot more crutches and limping andâ€

She wants someone real to blame.

"I'm scared," she admits in a shamefully tiny voice. "I'm scared thatâ€|that this is going to hurt, and that it'sâ€|" Hiccup lets her have her privacy, holding her hand while she stares at her knee. "It's not going to be the same. I'm never going to race again, and I'm never going toâ€|" her hand flops listlessly against her thigh. It bounces off of that still hard quad, so familiar six inches above the foreign line of her brace.

"It'll be different," Hiccup admits, nudging the metal end of his leg against her swinging healthy foot. "But it'll be okâ€|eventually."

"At least you're honest," she smiles at him, more sad than anything.

"What? You don't want any more of the 'you'll be racing again in five minutes' spiel?" She manages a tired chuckle and lies back on the cot, shifting and trying to get comfortable.

Nothing is comfortable.

Her knee sings at her, out of key and wretched, throbbing in time with her too fast heartbeat.

"I want the truth to be different."

"I know."

He holds her hand until they roll her away to the operating room.

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"Ok, you were right," Hiccup sing songs through an irrationally thick throat, sitting beside Astrid's hospital bed and looking at everything but her bandaged and elevated leg. "The anesthetic was a big deal after allâ€|you had a reaction, but that seems like sort of an understatement.

"I think they gave you too much because you insisted on telling them how tough you are, and they probably believed you," he laughs to himself, grin slowly fading to a frown as her face remains slack. "You would have punched me for that oneâ€|softy," he taunts to no avail, tapping his foot against the floor and abating the waiting

silence with the frenetic clicking. "I don't think I've ever seen you this _still_, even when you're asleep you're twitching."

He pauses to stroke the crest of her wrist, jagging between three cocoa brown freckles in a crooked line. She looks small, taking up barely half the bed with her knee propped up on a pile of pillows. He doesn't like that she looks small, it's wrong in his brain, something seems woefully out of place. She's supposed to be animated and awake, confident and sure of herself in the face of something daunting.

He doesn't like seeing her broken down and still. She looks almost too perfect, like a china doll in the midst of playing hospital, tan against the white sheets with perfectly smooth skin, only interrupted by unusually pale lips. She's normally more colorful, flushed and healthy, but something about her lying prone awakens a normally useless protective urge in the base of his chest.

He wants to climb on the bed with her, holding her close to him and making sure that her even breathing and slow paced heartbeat maintains itself. The idea of being that close to her right now makes him flush, and his eyes almost greedily take in the smooth planes of her cheeks and the cute way that her ears stick out and peek through her messy hair, falling out of her ponytail.

"Sometimes I forget just how pretty you are," he says more quietly, imaging the wonderfully animated eye roll that he'd receive if she could hear any of this. "When you're not snoring or making faces at Spike"and this is amazing that you haven't woken up to hit me"but it's sort of easy to forget you're"pretty much perfect.

"Not that I don't always think you're beautiful, because I do," he backpedals, and all of this seems ridiculously private and public all at once. Anyone could walk in right now, his father, nurses, Ruff popping down for a surprise visit and pretending that she's not worried, but at the same time every thought in his head is safe and protected by the shield of silence. "You look smaller than normal. I guess when you're up and moving you seem a lot bigger. Maybe that's on purpose"and I guess it works because you fooled the anesthesiologist.

"Honestly, I want to deck that guy," he laughs lightly, scooting his chair forward until his knees rasp against the sheets. His hand slithers over the covers and engulfs her small limp one, shrouding it entirely from view. "And I know you'd say he's yours to punch, but that's the glory of you sleeping, there's no one to restrain all this manliness." It's not as funny without her there to scoff and grin and his voice dips slightly. "They're keeping you over night," he informs her, oddly fixated on the utterly relaxed skin between her eyebrows, where she almost always seems to hold her expressions aloft, "but they'll kick me out at eight, and I doubt I'm scary, charming, or sneaky enough to convince them to let me stay.

"Plus, this chair sucks," he sighs and shifts, trying futilely to get comfortable. "It feels like it's reverse forming to me." He can't help but think about all of those countless hours during those three weeks she must have pretzeled herself into a chair like this. It's not something that he's even trying to repay, she didn't have any reason to do this back then, but it puts his hours old discomfort into perspective. "Now I know why you fell in love with me, anything in the room was better than the chair, and the IV bag turned you down

.

"That has always been sort of a mystery," he sighs after a too quiet moment, waiting for her to speak and of course hearing nothing. "One day you were terrifying me with kisses, which I was not ready for by the way," he laughs and squeezes her hand gently in his, like he's afraid of breaking it. She'd hate that. "And the next day you were crying over me and staying all night in an uncomfortable-ass chair and holding my handâ€¦you're lucky the shock didn't kill me.

"I'm still sort of surprised that it didn't kill me, if we're honest," he shakes his head, sympathetic to that terrified eighteen year old boy that he used to be, too confused and wrenched and misplaced to be properly elated. "I don't think I'm ever going to fully put together what happened while I was out. I mean, obviously my dad found his long lost best friend, and Toothless gained a mom, and you figured yourself outâ€¦and I laid there, probably looking way less tragically beautiful than you do now.

"And I know that you didn't love me before, it was what? Two days since you broke up with Scott? And we'd kissed twice?" He shakes his head, eternally wishing he'd known to press her against the door and make out with her when she'd showed up in the middle of the night and kissed him.

Hey, even if he had messed up, it's not like he'd even remember it anyway. He still only has a patchwork of that weekend, strung together by Astrid's extremely inaccurate and unflattering impression of him utterly terrified.

She laughs about that night now, but he gets the impression she was pretty crushed at the instant.

Crushed, not heartbroken.

Not the way she felt when they almost fell apart that next spring. She's ever more elegant than he is, and refers to those weeks as a plague on their relationship. Something evil that settled like a dark cloud and fed on fizzling the still new energy between them.

A plague like that would have made obscenely quick work of whatever spark they'd kindled before his accident. Extremely amplified them in a second and left a puddle of destroyed cells where something new had just been growing.

"Was it the silence that did it?" He ponders aloud, thumb stroking her skinny, still wrist. "Was I suddenly charming and dashing as soon as I shut up for five minutes?" He laughs at his own suggestion, "I don't think you'll ever tell me, and it's less likely that I'll figure out how your brain works.

"And I guess I'm ok with a forever not knowing," he smiles to himself and shakes his head. "See that's what you do, Astrid. You took a perfectly sane kid and turned him into a man who doesn't even care how your brain works, only that it does. And I completely blame the urge to punch doctors on you. That's entirely your fault.

"You're a good influence, Hofferson," he nods, tapping of his metal foot resuming. "I don'tâ€¦I used to be all in my head, you know? And I thought I knew everything, right on schedule for a seventeen year

old, I know, butâ€

"Your heart is beating really slowly." He pauses to look at her heart rate monitor, even and demure in a way Astrid isn't. "They gave you too much. Seriously, it's doctor punching time," he makes no move to stand, gripping her hand gently in his and fingering a flat white scar across her knuckles. "I don't know what I'd do withoutâ€"

"What would I have done with Toothless? Somehow drag him to Harvard with me? Right, 'hey roomie, hope you don't mind my _wolf_ sleeping in the corner'." Hiccup swallows hard, thinking of everything that's different because of that other, longer hospital stay. "I don't know if I ever would have stood up to anyone, you know? But I started right near the top of that pyramid, pissing you offâ€|

"That kid whose arm you brokeâ€|he was alright, but I swear he'd have fainted if I'd told him that we'd end upâ€"be, just beâ€"I promise I'm not creepily proposing to your unconscious bodyâ€"together. He was smart but he didn't know what the hell he was doing.

"He sort of wasn't doing anythingâ€|just drifting. He spent half of his time corralling Toothless and Spike and Meatlug further away from the world, and the other half wondering why he was lonelyâ€|It could have been worse than that number you did on my arm, I really didn't have that much longer to make a decision aboutâ€|I didn't have a plan besides 'don't do what dad wants'

"At some point, I don't even remember when, you told me that I made you want to be better, but you made me want to be _more_. I didn't want to be some geeky dog trainer. I wanted you to beâ€"I wanted you to think that I was better than Scott and that meant I worked on impressing you.

"And impressing you happened to cross through a whole lot of dignity check points." Her fingers twitch lethargically in his and his heart beats faster along with her machines, she mumbles inarticulately before fading back into that deep sleep. Her jaw slips slightly crooked as a wheezy snore slips out, and she's suddenly _his_ Astrid again, instead of the untouchably beautiful body snatcher who occupied the bed a moment before. He grins and stands just enough to kiss her forehead.

She responds with a remarkably chainsaw like sound and he sighs fondly.

"Well, _that_'s back to normal ."

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****Public Service announcement: ****

****So, it seems that a few people are asking about ACL injuries, which must mean that there are another 20 people who aren't asking. Basically, and I'm going to try to keep from biomechanically geeking out here, the ACL is one of the crucial ligaments that connects the upper leg to the lower leg. It commonly tears in female athletes, normally from a combination of general wear and tear and a catastrophic event such as a tackle or a fall. ****

****It does require surgery, because there is no bloodflow directly to**

the ligament, and this is a surgery that has really been reformed in the last ten years. It's now something that encourages the patient back on their feet, rather than laying down, and it's now a surgery that is done right away rather than waiting and forcing the knee to heal from two separate events. **

**If anyone has any specific questions, feel free to PM me or leave them in a review! This stuff is crazy interesting to me. **

**Thanks for coming back with so much enthusiasm, it means the world. **

3. Chapter 3

Warning: all that goofiness I promised starts nowâ€|

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"Hiccup," Astrid struggles against the drug fog to sit up halfway, looking evenly at Hiccup across the room. Hiccup scowls at her briefly, because his jaw still hurts, but something about her smarmy expression softens his anger. "I have some thoughts about your beard."

"You have some thoughts about my beard?" He asks, smiling at her slurred voice. It's sort of cute, in the same way as a dog wearing a protective cone or a child running around with big square Band-Aids on skinned knees.

"Yeah, and they aren't funny ideas, so stop smiling," she orders with a giggle he has never heard before, flopping back onto the couch and raising her hands in front of her face, intertwining her fingers and wiggling them like they're deeply fascinating.

"Ok, I'm listening, not smiling," he plays along, turning down the TV volume slightly.

"It's sort of prickly," she weighs the words carefully on her tongue, "but I kind of like it when it tickles. And don't tell me I told you, but when it gets all scruffy, you look superbly manly." She tells him earnestly, blue eyes wide and fuzzy.

Her knee is propped on a pile of pillows and she's covered with a thin blanket, doped up beyond what seems healthy. Hiccup guesses it's better than being in pain, but he knows that a sober Astrid would vehemently disagree. He reaches over and adjusts the blanket across her toes, tucking it in around her healthy leg. She sighs happily at the contact.

"Your secret is safe with me." She takes a sip from the water bottle she's been cuddling, and Spike looks at Hiccup, concerned.

Ever since he brought Astrid home, smelling like chemicals and snoring heavily as she relaxed limply against his chest, Spike has treated him as the enemy. She's been keeping Astrid _safe_ beyond menacing heckles, snarling at Hiccup whenever he tries to approach. It was alright until Toothless joined the anti-Hiccup brigade, and now whenever he reaches over to check on her, he fears losing a

hand.

It would be sweet if not for the snarling.

Mostly though, Hiccup is supremely glad that his dad left to go to some county council meeting in the district, because Astrid's filter is a little past lacking at the moment. She's practically spewing things he knows he's not supposed to hear, let alone his father.

"Hiccup?" She asks after a minute, pausing to take another long drink of water. He's glad that her bottle has a sealing straw, because it would not be a stretch for her to spill one down her front right now.

"Yes?"

"Do you want to know something?" She asks hopefully, and he's expecting another weird fact about her dorm room or lions.

"Sure."

"I'm glad that you stayed home," she mumbles, blushing for no reason. Hiccup is touched.

"It's no problem," he smiles warmly and her eyes drift a little further away.

"Sometimes I'm mean because you're good looking and it pisses me off when it distracts me," she admits tactlessly, stretching her arms over the edge of the couch and relaxing. Her fingers land on Spike's back and the pit-bull licks worriedly at her off-color skin. Astrid giggles.

"Astrid," Hiccup warns in his most gentle voice. "You're really high right now."

"No, but it's true," she shakes her head. "I just really like your body," and her deep sigh is anything but innocent, "and I like what it does to my body."

"Astrid!" He calls her out, smiling and flushing, a too large part of him wishing she said something akin to this when sober.

That'd be good for the ego.

"It's true," she shrugs and grins at him, and Hiccup takes pity on her future sobriety.

"Astrid," it feels like she won't necessarily register that he's talking to her if he doesn't preface everything with her name. "You're going to be way happier later if you stop talking now."

"Ok," she nods, pressing her fingertips together in the air before letting her hands fall onto her chest. She turns back to the TV and appears instantly absorbed.

"Ok, just tell me if you need anything," he reminds her and she nods

distractedly. "I'll be right back, alright?"

He gets up and ambles to the kitchen, snacking on an apple and staring at her peacefully napping form through the doorway. It was an adventure getting her home, between the determination to walk and her utter inability to do so. He's still sort of proud of himself for carrying her through the parking lot so easily, but it's not something to be brought up.

After finishing his apple and strolling around the first floor, collecting a couple of books and his backpack to entertain himself, he heads back to the kitchen and fills the ice bag. It's a slow fifteen minutes, carefully icing her knee while she drowns, mumbling unintelligible phrases every time he presses the ice against something sensitive.

He'd like to think she'd appreciate the effort, but at the same time he knows that he won't have a chance in hell to do this for her once she's awake.

It'll be all independence and struggling harder than she has to.

He kisses her smooth, placid cheek before setting the ice to the side on the table and taking his seat again, debating whether he should start his homework and deciding it won't kill him if he waits just a little longer. After about half an hour of half snoring silence, Astrid starts to perk up again, shifting around on the couch with a leather-on-leather squeak. He tries to leave her be, but as her knee rolls unsteadily in its clunky brace he reaches out, holding her foot carefully still.

He ignores Spike's growl and fixes the pillows so that she can't unseat her leg so easily.

"Your hands are always warm," she comments limply, wiggling her toes and asking for his touch with a slightly slurred voice.

"You've got to keep your leg still," he reminds her, all that dog-bark proof patience being tested.

"My foot itches," she complains, wincing even through the long-lasting anesthetic haze when she tries to scratch it. Hiccup sighs and stands, looking sternly at Spike and Toothless to arrest their panic, leaning over and tugging her sock off. She giggles and flinches as soon as his fingers touch the sole of her foot.

"Astridâ€" "

"That tickles," she snaps and he anchors his other hand on the top of her foot, firmly raking his fingernails over the bottom. She sighs in relief and props her hands behind her head, staring up at him with those dreamy, far-off eyes.

"Go back to sleep," he sighs, sitting back down in his chair and pulling a book out of his backpack, finally committing to the sad truth that he should probably start on that stack of weekend homework.

"You're distracting me," she shrugs then relaxes, peeking around her

elevated leg at him.

"Right, with all of these good looks," he plays along, flipping open to his current chapter, content to let her babble until she inevitably drifts off again.

"Mmm, yeah," she hums happily. "Your eyebrows are pretty much the best."

"My eyebrows?" He clarifies, sitting up straight and looking at her carefully.

She's not in her right mind, obviously. The doctors said it was something relatively common in young female athletes with high metabolism and low body weight. But just because she's not his normally bright and quick Astrid, that doesn't mean that she's not still Astrid, right?

He's suddenly hyperaware of his expression.

"And the whole rest of you," she adds, tugging on the blanket pulled up to her armpits and fidgeting to get comfortable. "I wantâ€¦I wantâ€¦" she starts clumsily, chewing on her lip and staring at him. "I want to get naked or something. With you," she professes, gesturing at the TV. "That's booooring and your freckles are interesting."

"Do you want to change the channel?" He asks, trying to keep his face straight through his oddly delighted blush, torn between embarrassment and pride.

"I'll get naked too," she offers, struggling with her shirt and wincing as she rolls too far to the side.

"Astrid," he hedges carefully, "you should probably keep your clothes on."

"Don't you remember how this works?" She asks, obviously peeved. "We get naked and then you come do wonderful, interesting things to me."

"Astridâ€¦"

"And you're really good at it," she nods, disarmingly earnest. "Like you do that thing with your hand, and your hips areâ€¦"

"Hun, nothing is going to happen right now," he cuts her off, mostly for the sake of her own eventual and practically guaranteed embarrassment. "Your knee is full of stitches and you'reâ€¦you're frankly high as a fucking kite."

"Just because we aren't going to do anything, doesn't mean I can't tell you things." Astrid sounds like a kid being told that a sleepover is off limits after looking forward to it for weeks. "It's not like she's going to remember any of this in the morning anyway."

Hiccup frowns and blinks slowly, taking her in with careful eyes like he's deciphering some fundamental code.

"By _she_ do you meanâ€|you?" He asks and she brings a finger to her lip, shushing him.

"Psh, yeah." She laughs to herself.

"Ok, she's going to whoop both of our asses tomorrow if you don't go to sleep," he warns her with a laugh, glancing towards the worried dog curled near the couch.

"I don't care what she thinks," Astrid wipes a hand over her face and scratches her forehead with tired, sweeping strokes. Her elbow bobbles uncertainly in the air above Spike's worried frown, and the dog whimpers and looks at Hiccup for assurance. "And neither of you can stop me from having fun," she grins, one hand slipping under the covers and fidgeting around her stomach for a minute before pausing.

"As long as you don't move your knee, have all the fun you want," Hiccup sighs, turning back to his book and trying to focus on the dense words.

"Oh, I am," she grins, mouth a little crooked, rakishly off-kilter.

"Ok," he shakes his head, trailing a finger across the page under the sentence that keeps slipping through his mind like a liquid in a sieve. He can't quite hold onto the words, and it's not that they're particularly long or life changing. He feels like he's needed somewhere else.

He doesn't know exactly what he should do, whether he should give her coffee or food or make sure her water is cold, but it seems like there should be some way to counter act her scattered mind. She would want him to, he knows that, she would hate feeling so vulnerable and exposed beyond her reasonable consent. She would-

"Hiccupâ€|" Astrid sighs in an all too familiar tone that yanks Hiccup's head upwards like a marionette. That tone doesn't belong in drugged out Astrid's mouth, it belongs under the covers of his bed on early Sunday mornings, with his lips between her legs and her hands in his hair.

"W-what are you doing?" The stutter slips out before he can stop it and Astrid giggles. It's only now that he sees the rhythmic sliding and swiveling of her arm under the blanket. The bent hand pressed into the crux of her legs, barely visible around her elevated knee.

"Even the stutter is working for me," she muses, voice a bit breathy and completely mystifying behind its droopy glaze. "Normally the stutter is a no, but right now I want to kiss it off of your face."

"That doesn't make any sense," he tells her, doing his best to ignore the absolutely captivating low moan that leaks out of barely parted lips. "Come on, Astrid, don't do this now."

"But I want to do it now," she mutters, drawing her lower lip into her mouth and biting it in a way that's far too appealing for her current mental condition. "And you won't help meâ€"

"No, I won't help you," he agrees with her, eyes tracing the slender curve of her neck, just visible behind a thin curtain of hair as her head lolls sideways to face the back of the couch. Spike growls, concerned at the change in Hiccup's breathing, scooting towards him on her belly with a look of warning in her eyes. "You should be sleeping."

"This will help me sleep," she sighs, shifting her hips against her hand and wincing as her knee twinges, a savage shout in her otherwise incredibly peaceful mind. Hiccup reaches out and grabs her good foot as platonically as possible, ignoring the demon in the back of his brain that's insisting she's Astrid, and it's no different than when she's drunk and handsy.

"Come on, hold still for your knee," he urges, unable to help sounding just a bit bitter. Of course the only time she attempts to seduce him, it can't work. The rest of the time she just starts taking his clothes off, and he knows it's time to flip his own starter switch. "We'll—we'll finish this later, alright?" The promise doesn't feel as hollow as it probably should and he swallows hard, attempting to clear all of those too lively thoughts from his mind.

"And you'll help?" She grins at him, peering around her knee and a blissfully still hand.

"If you take a nap."

"I'm not tired," she pouts, but he's happy to see her pull her hand from under the covers and cross her arms indignantly.

"Then pretend to take a nap," he turns back to his book, but the words aren't any stickier, sliding through his brain like they're greased.

"The ceiling is boring."

"Then look at the TV," he offers, rubbing his suddenly exhausted eyes.

Too much of him wishes he hadn't cut off her—enjoyment.

"I'm—I'm going to say something else."

"Oh, goody," Hiccup grumbles sarcastically.

"I hate that we go to different schools. I miss you."

"I miss you too," he tells her. "But I'll be here when you wake up with all of this out of your system."

"My knee is screwed," she mutters the last word in a low voice. "And I want it to be somebody's fault, so I can be mad, but it's my fault."

"It's not your fault, Astrid."

"If I hadn't been running around the corner—went and jounced my own goddamn limb," she laments, shaking her head and managing a serious

expression for a few seconds before cackling. "On a practice run," she laughs, "what's more ironic than that? A two mile practice run. Two miles."

"Your knee is going to be fine," he assures her, knowing that it's true, but hoping she doesn't start asking about time frame.

It's going to take a few months, and considering it frustrates Astrid when paper-cuts don't heal overnight, he knows just how inflammatory bringing up months would be.

"Not before it hurts for a long time," she admits, looking a little green beneath the bleariness. "Not looking forward to the pain."

"You have pills for the pain," he tries to comfort her, more than a little taken aback by her revelation. As far as he knows, Astrid doesn't worry about pain, she takes it as it comes and it never seems to set her back an appreciable amount.

He's suddenly overwhelmingly glad for every single time he convinced her to take ibuprofen, no matter how much she glared at him.

"Iâ€|knee pain is the worst. I'd rather break my leg or something."

"I'm glad you didn't break your leg."

"My head feels fuzzy," Astrid complains. "This is worse than tequila, but also better than that."

"Very astute," Hiccup turns a page in his book, continuing to read. She seems driven to babble, and even on heavy drugs, Astrid isn't someone that he wants to piss off. "You should go into philosophy."

"I wantâ€|" she throws her hands into the air and Spike whimpers, looking to Hiccup even more concerned than a moment before. Toothless comforts the pitbull with something that looks remarkably like an eye roll. "I want you to come kiss me."

"Astrid, you're not in your right mind right now." Normally, the rare times when she asks for him to advance, it's a shot to the reasonable portion of his brain, the part that keeps him off of her when society demands it.

But it's wrong and strange, and he stands his ground, no matter how brilliantly the sound of her moan is emblazoned on his brain.

Something strange happens when a couple is apart more than together, and most meaningful talks are over the phone and online. If he's already heard about her week and they've exhausted most topics of discussion remotely, the obvious and immediate reaction to seeing her is guttural and physical.

Not to mention the fact that they're twenty two and inherently energetic and wellâ€|amorous.

But right now, because of some indefinable combination of those dreamy blue eyes and her elevated, incredibly swollen knee, she seems more like a sick puppy than his girlfriend.

"But I _always_ want you to kiss me."

"You've still got anesthetic in your system," he reminds her and she frowns.

"I know my own head, and I know that I always like kissing you," she scowls at him before it dissolves into that disturbingly mild giggle.

"If I come kiss you," he offers with a reluctant sigh. Everything feels like taking advantage, and more is holding him back than the near promise that Astrid is going to be embarrassed and likely violent as soon as she manages to remember this. Even just realizing that her shirt is rucked up and revealing half of her stomach aside the crumpled blanket feels like an overstep. "Will you at least try to go to sleep?"

"If you come kiss me, you won't want me to go to sleep." She gives him a failed steamy look, compromised by a lagging mouth.

"Fine then," he turns back to his book, high-lighting an equation and ignoring her sloppy pout.

"Is that the only way you're going to kiss me?" She asks after a minute and he nods without looking up. "Fine. I'll _try_ to sleep. No dumb promises."

"Ok then," Hiccup sets his book aside and stands, letting a cautious Spike sniff at his fingers before leaning over and planting his lips against her forehead. Her clumsy hand reaches up to grope between his legs and he jumps back, glaring at her smarmy grin. "Astrid."

"Come on," she rolls her eyes, and Hiccup has to pry her fingers off of their fistful of his shirt.

"Right, because that's going to convince me to take advantage of you," he shakes his head at her and sits back down, tugging his book back onto his lap.

"Hicc-u-u-up," she stretches his name out ridiculously, grinning at him around her knee.

"No."

"But I like it and I love you," she insists. "And I feel strange, but you could make me feel good."

"You promised you'd go to sleep, remember?"

"Forehead kisses don't count," she complains. "And I wish you'd hmmm|mmm," she hums to herself, obviously lost in _thoughts_. "Yeah, you should come do that. I really want you to do that."

"Even if I knew what you were talking about," Hiccup turns up the TV. "I wouldn't do it."

"Can't stop me from thinking about it," she teases, clumsily wiggling her eyebrows at him.

He has half a mind to film this and show it to her tomorrow. But he likes living.

"No, I can't."

"And you can't stop me from talking about it."

"I'd like it if you talked about something else," he tries, pulling on his recliner's lever and leaning back.

"But I've already talked to you about everything else," she complains. "I haven't ever had the lady balls to tell you that I really like your penis though ."

"Ohâ€|" he flushes, crossing his legs self-consciously. Of all the things he wants explained to him, the admirable aspect of his...stuff is not part of the group. And sure, Astrid isn't exactly at her most arousing right now, through all the drugs, but it is still _her_. His lizard brain is only so reasonable.

And she's poking it with a stick.

"I mean, I just like it. I like how it curves and how it's smooth, and it twitches when I touch it and I like how it feels," she shrugs. "And I don't know why that's so hard to say. I love you, and I want you to feel good about your amazing penis."

"Ummâ€|thank you," he frowns, resisting to urge to laugh or leave or open up the floor to swallow him from view.

"But I mean, you've got more going on than the equipment, you know?" She stops for a second to stare curiously at the veins on her wrist as if she'd forgotten they're there, but resumes prattling before any sort of silent relief can settle in. "You just keep on coming up with all sorts of interesting new things, and making me look like a slouch," she pouts.

"Thanks," he looks around, making triply sure that his dad isn't pulling into the driveway just in time to hear the end of this tirade.

Astrid yawns widely and Hiccup grins.

Maybe she's finally running out of fatigued steam.

"And I really like it," she nods furiously, but it makes her dizzy. She yawns again. "So even though sometimes I want to sleep or get up instead of doing stuff, I really love everything you do with your nice," yawn, "penis."

"Ok."

"Now stop talking to me, I need to sleep," her snap is giggly and ineffective, but Hiccup nods. "Andâ€|I need more pills in yesterday," she scolds him and he nods obediently, unable to hold back a grin.

"Go to sleep."

"Ohâ€|shut up," she garbles and her eyes finally fall shut
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Astrid recognizes the couch under her before anything else makes sense. She groans and tries to push up onto her elbows, blinking slowly and giving in without much struggle as a warm, insistent palm pushes back on her shoulder.

"Astrid?" Hiccup's voice slices through what feels like her worst ever hangover haze and she frowns at his oddly questioning tone.

"You were expecting someone else?" She huffs, trying to move past her decidedly asleep legs and get comfortable. He holds carefully to her thigh and she opens her eyes to look down.

There's that brace she somehow managed to forget about, canting her foot out at an awkward angle and holding her knee captive. Hiccup is sitting on the edge of the coffee table holding a towel covered ice bag against her knee, obviously cautious of the stitches underneath her thick bandage.

"Just wondering if you were back," his free hand slides down the uncaged part of her calf and wraps around her foot, rubbing at her arch. She hums and relaxes before fully taking in the meaning of his words and stiffening slightly in response.

"What do you mean 'back'?" She rubs her eyes and pushes her hair back before glancing down at that ice bag. It suddenly seems profound.
"You're icing my knee."

It's not like he just remembered to set some ice on it or anything, he's attentively next to her, so carefully holding the cold against the different facets of her swollen joint with just enough pressure to be truly cold, but not enough to hurt. And he's still rubbing her foot, which somehow manages to feel good even diffusing through the chemical haze still numbing her entire body.

"Yeah, fifteen minutes every hour," he tells her, repositioning the ice against the other side of her knee and carefully pressing it against the bandage. The pain awakens for a minute, only to be silenced by the rush of cold. "And you were a bit out of it earlier."

"How many times have you done this?" She asks, a strange warmth blooming in her chest as she watches his bone white and obviously cold fingers adjust their grip.

"Six times since you got home," he smiles lightly, mostly to himself and she wrinkles her nose.

"How did I get home?"

"I drove you," Hiccup fills her in patiently, warm fingers sliding over the arch of her foot. "Do you know what year it is?" He jokes and she manages to roll her eyes.

"Howâ€" She pauses to watch him adjust the ice again, feeling mysteriously warmer, blinking slowly and trying to reconcile the sensation with words.

It's hot cocoa on a snowy evening, and a warm calf to press her feet against. It's lunch in bed, because he slept too late for it to be breakfast. It's morning back rubs and irresponsible smiles when they see each other after a long, lonely week.

It's love, and that much is simple and obvious.

But it's permanent.

It feels momentarily endless, spilling off all edges of the world. She doesn't mind in the moment, and she wonders if she's going to remember to care later when her head feels normal.

"You ok?" He asks after a couple of minutes of hard-thinking silence, turning to set the ice bag beside him on the coffee table.

"Yeahâ€"I'mâ€" thinking scary things like forever. "I guess I'm still a little out of it."

"Oh, this is nothing," he grins, scooting closer so that his knees press against her side. Her hand finds his thigh and strokes along the seam of his jeans with notably clumsy fingers. "You had a bit of a reaction to the anesthetic." Her eyes widen and he's glad he's only responsible for filling in a day of limbo.

"What kind of reaction?" She asks slowly, pushing up onto her hands and wincing as her knee tells her to lay back down with a gleaming throb. "If it is three weeks laterâ€" Her voice escalates in pitch until Hiccup cuts her off by gently pushing her back onto the pillows. He can't be pressing very hard, but something about the earnest fingers curled around her is very convincing.

Not to mention how downright heavy she feels.

"23 hours," he informs her gently, pulling his hand back as if to let her be. "The hospital kept you overnight to make sure everything was alright, and you came home this morning."

She frowns at the decidedly strange news and looks around the room, spying a shiny new pair of crutches that look a lot closer to her size than Ruff's or Hiccup's. Her stomach growls as she glances past the kitchen, and she wonders if this slowness isn't mostly low blood sugar. The clock on the wall says 1:30 and she realizes that she hasn't run at all in more than two days.

That has to be a record for her.

"I used crutches?" She's less than elegant on those things when she's fully awake.

"You triedâ€"and failed," he laughs, remembering her slow, doomed sideways lean and insistence that she was absolutely fine. "Then I carried you," he turns his head to the side and points to a slightly swollen lump on his jaw. "And then you slugged me because I wouldn't

let you walk, but you fell back asleep halfway to the car." She bites back an embarrassed laugh and squeezes his knee apologetically.

"Sorry about that."

"And that's not the end of it," he smiles at her, blushing almost ominously. "Then you refused to go to sleep once we got home and told me a bunch of secrets." Now he looks genuinely thrilled and Astrid's ravenous stomach drops like a rock.

"What kind of secrets?" She tries for threatening, but ends up somewhere near anxious.

"You didn't say anything _bad_ per sayâ€|embarrassing maybeâ€|and exceedingly flattering for me," he grins impossibly wide, past the point of handsome and into some other realm where only kids at Disney World dwell.

"What did I say, exactly?" And that would be scary if she were even marginally more mobile.

"That you love me," he informs her with a cheeky grin. She glares expectantly, waiting for the rest. "Oh right, that one isn't a secret. You told our entire graduating classâ€|Ow!" She smacks his thigh and he flinches, smile diminishing. "How can you still hit that hard? You're supposed to be drugged."

"Seriously, what did I say?"

"You just said a lot of nice, graphic things about my bodyâ€|"

"Oh godâ€|" she moans.

"And our relationship, and how I'm pretty great in bedâ€|"

"Well that's not so bad..."

"And at one point you went ahead and _started_ without meâ€|"

"Ok, I get the picture," she sighs, wiping a hand over her slightly clammy face and groaning to herself.

"My ego is awesome right now," he informs her with a self-satisfied nod, "thanks for asking."

"Oh, great. The egoâ€|" A smile peeks through her chagrin and her hand find's Hiccup's on top of the covers over her waist. She drags their interlaced fingers over her stomach and shakes her head theatrically at the ceiling. "Now I have to worry about deflating that, on top of everything elseâ€|"

"Hey!"

"I'm sure everything I said was true," she throws him that little bone, squeezing his hand in hers and nodding gently. She probably hasn't been this red in years.

"Really?" he smirks. "Because that's a pretty bold assumption considering I didn't even tell youâ€|"

"And it never leaves your brain," she declares sternly. "Even I don't want to hear it. Never." Sometimes it's better to let sleeping dogs lie, especially if Hiccup gets an ego boost out of it and she can blame being drugged for her embarrassment.

"Deal."

"Now come here," she gives a duller than normal tug on his arm and he follows obediently, pressing his lips onto her expectant pucker. Her hand finds the soft hair at the nape of his neck, tugging on it gently and pulling away, letting his forehead rest against hers.

"That's all I get?" He teases, hand tucking her blankets more tightly around her waist.

"I'm starving," she lets herself pout as exhaustion blooms in her chest. He smiles and swipes a tender hand across her cheek before kissing her forehead and sitting up.

"What do you want?" He frowns at the open ended question and backpedals. "What can you eat horizontally?"

"I bet I could manage some cookies," she grins hopefully. It's not like her diet matters right now anyway. After three weeks of boring seared chicken and whole wheat pasta while she got into racing shape, anything sweet and empty sounds like heaven.

"Cookies? If my dad hasn't eaten them allâ€|" he rolls his eyes and stands, for the first time the more graceful of the two of them. "I'll be right back."

Watching that ass she surely told him all about move evenly under his almost satisfyingly tight jeans, it occurs to her that she sincerely hopes they never break up.

'Always' should be scarier.

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Thank you for your continued amazing response. I hope that this chapter kept up the good workâ€|as strange as it got for a while thereâ€|

**That being said, I think an afternoon with High!Astrid would probably be the best thing ever. So much information. **

I would absolutely love to hear what you all have to think of this chapter, and the next installment will be out on Wednesday, April ninth. Thank you!

4. Chapter 4

Sorry for being a bit late with this, busy night.

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"Come on," Hiccup nags, and Astrid can't help but think that it makes

his tone even more nasal than normal and that it's really not a good thing.

"No," she resists coercion with a matter of fact tone, smart enough to cap the anger that she really can't back up or justify.

"You seriously have to take one," he shakes the bottle of pills at her and she scowls, turning to glare at the TV, trying to erase him from her peripheral vision.

"I took the antibiotic, I don't have to take anything else."

"Oh, that's great," he gestures dramatically, face flushed and frustrated. Toothless is his trans-species twin, sitting stern and asymmetrical by Hiccup's foot, staring Astrid down like a disappointed parent. "You're just going to choose to be in excruciating pain."

"It doesn't hurt that bad," she insists, and it's true, as long as she doesn't move or breathe too deeply.

"Astrid, they wouldn't give you these if they didn't think you'd need them." She turns to glare at him, faltering on Toothless's uncomfortably serious face.

Admonished by a wolf, this is a new low.

"Make him stop lecturing me with his face," she orders, but it sounds less serious than she'd hoped as Hiccup stares her down with concerned annoyance. "Seriouslyâ€¦it'sâ€¦just make him stop." Her knee twinges and Toothless's stare hardens further.

"Maybe you'll listen to him."

"It's not that I'm not listening," Astrid rolls her eyes and crosses her arms with slow creaking movements as she tries not to disturb her antsy knee. "I'm disagreeing, but I hear you loud and clear."

"Astridâ€¦" He starts in that low, soothing voice that works magic on storm spooked dogs, and Astrid sneers.

"Don't 'Astrid' meâ€¦"

"Just take the pill, it'll help, I promiseâ€¦"

"It doesn't hurt that bad!" She insists, wincing when the dramatic re-inflation of her lungs sends a twinge through the entire right side of her body. "I am absolutely okâ€¦oh." Her rant stops in its tracks when Spike ambles from her post curled by the couch to line up shoulder to shoulder with Toothless.

She mimics the wolf's stern expression and Astrid sighs, head falling back against the couch with an uninhibited grunt.

Her own dog is now turning on her.

"Astrid, there's no shame in taking somethingâ€¦"

"I'm not ashamed!" She barks, and Spike nervously licks the side of

her blue dog nose, looking more to Toothless than Hiccup, obviously torn between comforting her girl and standing strong. Toothless twitches a pointed ear her direction and she lays down, nervous smile absorbed into that preaching expression. "I'm not ashamed," Astrid repeats, voice lower in unspoken apology for making Spike nervous. "I'm just sick of feeling hazy and pathetic and _stupid_."

Hiccup remembers the feeling of his brain trying to slip around in his own skull, waterlogged with opiates. For that entire first day, he drifted in and out of reality, exploring that gelatinous matrix of separate and confused memories that craved assembly.

He remembers new prosthetics, staring at the huge, chalky pain pills and wondering if they had anything that could make him feel better without zombifying him. Astrid is even smaller than he was, which is saying something, and she's far less tolerant of being altered.

Unless it's tequila.

"Half of one?" He suggests his own proven solution mildly, and the understanding tone replacing his previous frustration brings Astrid's head around to face him.

"What?"

"Try taking half of one," he repeats, pulling his pocket knife out of his pants and setting a pill on the table, neatly splitting it in two and discretely tucking the slightly smaller half back into the bottle. "It feels more like a giant Tylenol than something you bought off of a guy named Tweak."

She looks between the pill and his face, expression crumpling into an almost demure frown.

"I'm sick of you _dealing _with me," she admits in a too small voice, and it takes everything in Hiccup not to remind her that she had surgery two days ago and he's going to be taking care of her for a while yet. She holds a pale hand out to accept the pill with a notable lack of eye contact. "You're supposed to be doing homework and building your final project, but you're stuck in here mommy-ing me."

She knows she's an awful patient, and it's something she's earnestly trying to work on. But this morning when Hiccup woke her up at ten with a glass of water and her first round of pills, she felt like a pampered child. She hates the fact that she can't get up and walk ten feet to the kitchen by herself, and she hates just how willing he is to do it for her.

Over the years, what people think has faded into a shadow of the monstrosity that used to control her every movement and most of her thoughts. It was steadily replaced by the infinitely more reliable and far more moral gage of what Hiccup thinks.

Hiccup thinks she's weak, and that she needs medication.

Lovely.

"I'd much rather mommy you than work on that project," Hiccup tries to assure her, but the sentiment slaps her across the face and solidifies her uselessness. He watches like a hawk as she brings the pill past her lips and swallows it back with a chug of water, grimacing as the bitter aftertaste assaults her tongue. She looks back up at him with a muted red expression somewhere within the spectrum of ashamed. "I'm so done with that project for today. Honestly, I've burned out two motors. _Today_."

"I have no idea what that means," Astrid admits with a quiet laugh that's disconcertingly self-deprecating.

Spike relaxes at the sound, recognizing laughter no matter how morose, and pads back to the couch, curling up where she knows Astrid can reach down and scratch her ears. Toothless's mouth falls open in that disconcertingly gormless grin and he leans against Hiccup's leg, panting happily.

"Basically, it means that I have to go back to Hobby Town," Hiccup sighs, "for the fourth time this week."

"That sucks," Astrid picks her laptop off of the coffee table, wincing as her knee gives a shuddering twinge, reminding her that it's still there and still hurt, as if she could easily forget.

"I would have gotten that for you," Hiccup reminds her with an aggravated sigh, and Astrid can't think of anything but her disastrous attempts baby-sitting as a teenager.

Great, now she's clinging to the petulant child side of that stick.

"I don't _need_ your help with everything."

"I don't mind," he insists and she looks at him with rampant disbelief. "I'm not _dealing_ with you."

"I'm not used to being _dealt_ with."

Like she's an issue, something to be accounted for and worked around.

She's not cut out for this.

"How many times have you helped me with this?" He gestures to his left foot and Astrid follows that line of his hand, struck with the realization that this is the same thing.

She's down and he's not.

Her leg, his leg. Both stubborn, useless, and _wrong_.

Podiatry is something that she never thought she'd have in common with Hiccup. She never thought she'd understand the diffuse weight of limited mobility, or the obvious embarrassment when standing is suddenly a practically athletic act in and of itself.

"A couple," she answers his question with a humbling smile. "We match now, don't we?"

"You're finally in my league," he jokes and she rolls her eyes.

"Hiccup," her tone chastises, out of sync with genuinely appreciative eyes. She's happy for the comfort, but unflinching that it won't come from Hiccup tearing himself down like he's so prone to do, even after all this time.

"You can finally come to my gimp club meetings," he grins, and somehow it's not left within Astrid to be insulted.

"Only if you guys have sweet tee-shirts."

"They're a little crooked," he laughs to himself, continuing the joke. "The guy we have on the printing press leans a little left." Astrid snorts, and no matter how persistent her anti-leg joke creed has been until now, it doesn't seem so abhorrent in the moment.

"You're horrible."

"Is the pill kicking in at all?" He asks through the weak guise of a responding laugh, hoping to bypass her bravado.

"A little," she concedes with downturned eyes. She can take a deep breath without suppressing the urge to cry, and that's a vast improvement. "Thanks for bargaining with me instead of trying to make me take it."

"Right," he nods. "I can make you do stuff because you can't beat me upâ€¦I like this."

"Ass. I could still take you," she insists, all bluster.

"Totally," he deadpans and Astrid scoffs, turning back to her computer. "How is your paper going?" Of course Astrid is back at her homework two sane days after surgery.

"It's alright," she smiles wryly at him. "I've about beaten 'A Separate Peace' to death."

"Never heard of it," Hiccup laughs sheepishly, and it's sweet subtle revenge for all that talk about motors.

"Ironically, it features a broken leg," she simplifies with a shrug.

"Your leg isn't broken." Hiccup insists and Astrid frowns.

She's sick of this thing being massive and looming, unspoken and comforted. She hates this.

"I look broken," she admits, and feels stronger rather than weaker. Words build behind the relief like a tsunami until they spill out. "It's a book about fault and the state of the world and its irrelevance to the everyday. Everyone is blaming themselves for this." She gestures to the brace and Hiccup remembers just yesterday when she blabbered on about how she could have prevented this in her slurred tone. "My trainer thinks it's her fault because I wasn't doing some strengthening exercise, and your dad feels like he

should have tried to prepare me for a career ending injury, and I'm pretty sure you're guilty because you didn't magically poof to my side the second I got hurt.

"And I really wish that I could blame someone. I do. I wish it were your fault or my coach's or some lazy snow plow driver's, but it's not."

"It's just bad luck," Hiccup agrees grudgingly.

"Really shitty luck," and saying it out loud finalizes all that bitterness towards some higher power she can't help but feel spited and slighted by. The bitterness towards her newfound loathing of the concept of winter solidifies, and she's smart enough to notice the regrettable irony that she's always wanted to mock Hiccup for his personal feud with all things icy. "And you know what the worst part is?" She asks with a miserable laugh and Hiccup shrugs, happy that she's talking to him about this, but too smart to let it show right now.

"My dad keeps trying to carry you places?" He highlights his personal least favorite aspect of incapacitation.

"That is uncomfortable," Astrid laughs, "but it's the fact that I can't even get my stitches wet, so I can't shower until at least next weekend. That seems likeâ€¦I shouldn't even care about being clean right now with everything else I have to worry about, but I'm justâ€¦my hair is greasy, and I hate it, and I can manage most of the rest of me with a washclothâ€¦but I just feel _gross_."

Hiccup grins, because there's finally something that he can help with. He steps up beside the couch and holds a hand out. She looks at his fingers like some odd, culturally out of place offering and he looks down at her impossibly fondly.

At least she has Hiccup to take care of her.

"Come on," he waves at her with that offered hand, "as your sometimes human crutch, I'm personally invested in you being at least semi-clean," he regurgitates, and it's suddenly years ago and she's heaving him down a hallway, oblivious to the fact that her entire life is about to change again, for the better this time.

"You took my line."

"It seemed to fit," he smiles, sliding an arm behind her shoulders and under her good leg and lifting with an ease that should make Astrid furious.

She has problems summoning that anger at the moment.

"I thought we just mentioned I don't like being carried," she snips through a blush, crossing her arms.

"By my dad," he laughs, starting down the hallway with slightly strained breath. "You're just painfully bad at crutches. I can't watch that right now."

"Oh shut up," her arm winds around the back of his neck and hauls some of her weight off of his arms as he kicks open his unlatched

bathroom door and unceremoniously sets her on the closed toilet seat.

He turns and unsticks his shower chair's suction cups from the floor of the tub, reversing it and looking critically at Astrid's leg before carefully jamming it back into place.

"Hmâ€|how much does your leg straighten?" He asks and she sheepishly shows him the stiff brace that locks her joint entirely into position.

"I'm serious, I can't get these stitches wet."

"Give me a minute," he looks at her seriously. "I'm an engineer, I can figure this out."

"Okâ€|" she rolls her eyes and leans back against the toilet, jiggling her good foot impatiently. Very suddenly she is again scooped into skinny arms and deposited into the shower chair. Hiccup carefully lifts her bad leg and props her heel onto the edge of the tub.

"See?" He beams at her and she nods, shifting slightly to get comfortable.

"I'm comfortable, but I really can't get this wet."

"Oh, I was thinking I'd mostly just be washing your hair," he corrects her a bit sheepishly. He gestures to the removable shower head, once again glad for the device that has made his life endlessly easier the past few years.

"You'll wash my hair?" She asks, a bit uncomfortable at her helplessness at the same time as she's glad for the sentiment. "I don't know ifâ€|I don't even have my shampoo in here."

"I can go get your shampoo," he smiles. "Or you could just use mine, because I really don't care."

"You don't have to do this."

"It's helping you wash your hair, not giving you my firstborn."

She gulps, realizing that at this point, his firstborn is her firstborn, and that mental consolidation is utterly frightening.

"I don't think anyone's washed my hair since I still needed help in the bath," she laughs, uncomfortable and avoiding eye contact.

This goes a little beyond the scope of icing her knee and feeding her pills, doesn't it?

"I'm offering," he reminds her in that gentle voice that makes her want to order him to butt out of her brain. "You're not asking me to."

"Iâ€|" she stares at her toes, resenting the way her elevated foot nearly glows unhealthy white. "Thisâ€|"

Helping Hiccup has been an implicit relationship requirement as long

as she and Hiccup have been in a relationship. It's something she's never really minded, and it has only been immensely frustrating when he wanders off from his leg on crutches preoccupied or adamantly refuses to tell her that there's a problem.

And he's helped her. He has helped her more than she ever could have asked for, and it's something unspoken and bonded between them.

He's never helped her like this. She hasn't been the one who needed a shoulder in years, as his school got harder and she got used to the pressure of her routine. Not to mention the glaring fact that, she's always been strong and upright, fully physically independent.

If he helps her with this, is it going to be some vast shift in their relationship? Is she suddenly going to be less or weaker or demeaned in any way?

No, she won't. She trusts Hiccup more than that.

But it'll feel like it, back in that violently independent part of her brain. The part that she's trying so hard to silence and calm.

"You don't want me to," he sighs, leaning down to remove her from the tub as chivalrously as he can. She frowns at his drooping face and holds a palm out, stopping him from lifting her.

"I can't do anything myself," she admits in a quiet, private voice. "I've never been this helpless before. Never."

"You're not helpless, you have me," he says simply and she scowls at the wall in front of her, staring into the tile grout like it's withholding a secret. "Is the wall answering?"

"You want to do this?"

"I want to help," he assures her, glancing down at her white-knuckled hand wrapped around the edge of the tub. He wants to reach out and touch her, or something, but it seems like one of those times she's silently requesting the yawning space between them.

"I owe you one," she nods resolutely, permitting the practice and leaning her head back against the shower chair and fidgeting to get comfortable.

"You don't owe me anything."

"You're going to turn down my help in the shower?" She asks with a piqued eyebrow, oddly glad when Hiccup blushes and the dynamic is restored if only briefly.

"Well, not if you put it that way," he grins and rubs a hand up the back of his neck, looking at her headedly before flicking his eyes to her knee and metering his expression. "I'll go get your shampoo."

"And conditioner," she reminds him, closing her eyes and listening to the oddly soothing click thump of his one bare foot ambling across the hallway. He's back a moment later, two bottles in hand and looking at her for approval. She nods and manages a slight smile,

frowning before reaching down and tugging her shirt over her head and dropping it on the floor. "That would have gotten soaked."

"Good call," he stares at her face before the scope of his vision widens and he frowns, setting the bottles on the edge of the tub and disappearing into his bedroom. A moment later he reappears in the doorway, rolling his computer chair to the side of the tub and sitting down. "There we go."

"You've really thought this through," She tries to relax back into the chair, suddenly acutely aware of the comparatively cool air on the bare skin of her chest and stomach. She has half a mind to take her bra off and make this something intimate and familiar rather than this new brand of helpless awkward, but that implies being afraid of this new sort of closeness.

She's not.

Well, maybe not afraid. Perplexed, anxious, worried that things might shift and change. Never afraid of him.

He reaches above their head and pulls down the shower head, turning on the faucet and waiting for the stream to come to temperature. Astrid shivers as the still warming mist lights on her back through the slits in the back of the chair and Hiccup scoots the water away from her shoulders, aiming it away from her.

"That better?"

"It was fine," she assures him, feeling oddly beyond exposed, looking up at him through the lens of the peculiar angle. He must be outside more than normal lately, because his cocoa colored freckles are even thicker than she's ever seen along his cheekbones. He trimmed his beard, probably yesterday, and as much as she liked the rugged lines of it, she missed him looking clean and familiar above the masculine line of his jaw, square and strong beneath high cheekbones. He furrows thick eyebrows over those impossibly green eyes as he tests the water with his fingers, adjusting the temperature slightly. Astrid reaches back to pull the hair tie out of her ponytail and Hiccup catches her wrist.

"I got it."

"Come on, I can do that much," she pouts, flush travelling down past her collarbone as he lets her ponytail loose and rakes careful fingers through the tangles.

"Hey, this is pretty much the first thing that you're letting me do for you ever since you remembered your last name. I'm going to do it right."

"And it's not right if I take out my own hair tie?"

"Nope," and he starts carefully smoothing her hair back from her face and wetting it down with the steamy water. She can't help but groan as the sensation scratches greasy itches she didn't recognize before they were soothed and taken care of, and Hiccup grins, combing through her hair with short fingernails that barely graze her scalp and make her toes curl a little too much.

He's washing her hair, not doing anything erotic.

Not that she necessarily minds his concentrated expression, or the way that the hot water is licking across her skin and nursing every itchy groove in her scalp. She definitely doesn't mind the way he's biting his lip in concentration as he carefully gets the underside of her hair soaked through before flicking the showerhead's valve shut and letting it hang against the bathtub wall.

"Ok, that felt pretty good," she pouts quietly after the water has been off for a minute and Hiccup smiles and raises his eyebrows at the admission.

"I'm not even going to say 'I told you so'," he reaches towards the bottles on the edge of the tub and hesitates with a frown that really shouldn't be so handsome. The beard works for him, in its way, but she misses just how blatantly obvious his expressions are with a clean shaven jaw. It's like reading a magazine, instead of deciphering something through a layer of scruff. But it's a sort of deciphering that most likely requires lips. And teeth. Andâ€" "â€|listening?"

"Hmm?" She blinks too quickly, wondering if even half of a heavy duty painkiller is too much for her.

She has a sneaking suspicion that Hiccup is just too much for her right now. As much as she'd never admit it in a million years, being taken care of isn't exactly a turn off. She finds herself absolutely keen to _repay_ him.

"Does shampoo or conditioner come first?" He asks, that concerned expression once again apparent on his features. She blinks rapidly to clear her mind.

"Shampoo."

"Alrightâ€|" he mumbles mostly to himself, pouring some of the clear liquid into his hand and bringing it to her scalp, clumsily wiping it across the slicked surface of her hair and massaging it in with both sets of fingers. She melts into the touch and her eyes slip shut as his hands work their way around to the back of her neck, lifting her head slightly and running the soap through the length of her hair.

She sighs happily and stretches her good leg out to prop it alongside those shockingly cold metal edges on her brace.

"This should be a thing," she mumbles, tilting her head back again as his fingernails work across the back of her scalp.

"A thing?" He laughs at her blissful expression, her lips curled into a dreamy smile.

"We should do this more," she opens her eyes and nods at him, face healthily flushed for the first time since her accident. Hiccup reaches down and reopens the showerhead valve, rinsing his hand then bringing it to her hair and laughing as she moans appreciatively.

"So _we_ should have me wash your hair more?" He affirms, squeezing

the shampoo out of the thick blonde and making sure that he wipes all of the suds away from her hairline.

"I'll do yours too," she promises with a contented hum stretching her hands above her and rolling her shoulders against the chair. A warm dribble of water runs down her spine and she frowns briefly. "It can be a tradition. Tuesday night hair washing."

"Why Tuesday?" Hiccup laughs, again turning off the showerhead and picking up the bottle of conditioner. "And how exactly does conditioner work anyway?"

"You just sort of comb it through," she tells him, once again opening her eyes and watching him open the bottle. His brow remains furrowed as he combs the opaque glob through her hair, so carefully distributing it through the soaked mass.

There's something utterly charming about the attention to detail and she lets herself get lost in his expression. It's familiar, she's seen it a million times when he's sketching out some new invention in that graph paper notebook that rarely leaves his side. She's seen it when he's crouched next to Toothless, affixing that perpetually half-finished prosthetic to the wolf's shoulder and tinkering with the straps across his torso.

She's seen it when his hand is pressing and churning against her, his eyes boring into hers as the room heats up and the world falls apart beneath her

"Ok?"

"What?"

"You're sort of staring off into space," he lets her know, "and staring at me."

"Oh," she mumbles in response, humming to herself as he picks the water back up and starts to rinse the conditioner from her hair, combing through in long, slow strokes. "Thanks for doing this," she blurts after a too quiet moment and he smiles down at her, turning off the faucet and letting the shower head hang.

"It's no problem," he insists, reaching down and wringing as much water as he can from her thick hair before rolling to the side and grabbing his towel off of its rack. He wraps the soft terry cloth around her head and rubs gently, sopping up most of the residual water.

"Seriously, thank you."

"Seriously, it's no problem," he repeats, leaning down and kissing her forehead. It turns into something more when her hand weaves into the soft hair on the back of his head and aims his mouth downwards, lips clashing sideways, clumsy but electric at the unfamiliar angle. His hand lands against her stomach, sliding up under the band of her bra and cupping her ribcage, thumb stroking smoothly over the skin.

Her arms wind around his neck and she uses him to haul herself out of the chair, succeeding in getting closer for a brief second before her

knee quakes and complains though a physical megaphone. She lets go with a groan, lips popping apart with a wet smack as she flops back onto the chair with an embarrassing whine.

"Ow, ow, ow!" she mutters, hands jumping off of his shoulders and cradling the outside of her brace as the keen pain finally subsides. Hiccup sheepishly rests a hand on her bare arm, smiling apologetically through flushed, slightly swollen lips.

"I should probably get you back to the couch," he hands her the tee-shirt off of the floor and she tugs it back over her head, grimacing as it dampens from the stray moisture against her back. Hiccup seems to understand the hurry and scoops her up as soon as she's covered, faltering slightly at lifting her from such a low seat. He adjusts his grip on her good knee and grins, obviously proud of himself.

She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms, ignoring the way that her damp but blissfully clean hair is soaking the back of her shirt.

"You just _enjoy_ carrying me," she accuses him and he shrugs, even with her added weight.

She seethes at that detail.

"I have the right to remain silent," he claims with a too cheeky grin, carrying her back out to her sick roost in the living room

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"Ok, ok, so who's this one again?" Astrid asks, sitting with her feet propped on the coffee table and feeling far livelier as her hair dries and curls slightly. She combs her fingers through the long strands, cocking her head to the side and trying to pay attention to the TV as Hiccup explains the apparently complicated on screen interactions, oblivious to the camp of the horrible eighties era effects.

"That's Lieutenant Yar," Hiccup explains with a laugh, "she's the one you liked in the last episode. The one who beat up the guys."

"Right!" Astrid nods, frowning a bit and trying to put together another strange face with a name. "And she's with the big lumpy forehead guy, right? The Stick-on?"

"Klingon," Hiccup corrects.

"There's tension there. Do they get together?" Astrid asks, cocking her head and glancing up at him through slightly frizzy bangs, fingers catching on a knot halfway down the length of her hair. "Eventually?"

"No!" he thinks for a moment before deciding to divulge, because it's not like she's going to pay attention to the rest of the episode anyway. When he was a kid, sometimes a TV show was the only thing that could keep his mind focused and somewhere else for half an hour, but Astrid's the opposite. Give her a book and she's gone for a day,

but try to immerse her in the bowels of Star Fleet and she's braiding and unbraiding hair like it's an emergency. "Yar dies in the first season, right before they were supposed to _spar_."

"Lame," she frowns. "I feel like they'd be pretty unbeatable. Their fights would be hellish though," her head lolls further to the side, hair dancing against his lower arm. He twitches away and shoots her a look.

"That tickles."

"Sorry," she sits back up straight, gripping her hair and sliding it over her opposite shoulder. "I don't normally let it dry without braiding it. It's distracting."

"It looks good," he compliments, reaching across the cushion between them and running careful fingers above her ear, pushing a stubborn shock of bangs away from her face. "I should wash it more often." She rolls her eyes at his grin, hand landing casually against his knee and stroking at the softer patch of denim there.

"Thanks for that," her voice dips, quiet and self-conscious, no matter how much he assured her that it was nothing. "It was a huge favor."

"No big deal," he shrugs, looking back at the TV and frowning at some deep matter of plot that Astrid doesn't quite follow. If only they'd write it down, maybe it would hold her attention and she wouldn't spend the entire time distracted by the fact that aliens all look like hair models on the set of the Breakfast Club.

She glances sidelong at Hiccup, focused on the screen with those thick eyebrows furrowed into an unnaturally appealing line. He chuckles to himself after a joke she doesn't catch, leaning back against the far end of the couch, her good leg bent and folded between them. He must be reading her mind when his hand finds her knee, stroking slowly at the soft skin just above the swell of her calf, solid and warm.

She likes the way that his hand looks against her skin, pale and freckled, short fingernails glancing over her comparatively tan leg with a maddening rhythm.

"I never really _thanked _youâ€|" she leads, biting her lip and leaning a little towards him, long strands of blonde tickling the back of his wrist as all sorts of thought of repaying him springing to the forefront.

"Thanked me for what?"

"For washing my hair," she reminds him, hand folding over his near her knee.

"You said thank you," he grins at her briefly before turning back to the TV, and she remembers when just looking at him through her eyelashes drew all of his attention to her like a focused laser. Her fingers slide around to grip at the soft underside of his wrist, stroking the callused ridge where it swells into the heel of his hand.

"But I didn't _really_ _thank_ you," she hints, raising an eyebrow at him without realizing the effect is diminished by the thick, still slightly damp bangs hanging over her forehead. "If you know what I meanâ€|"

"Hmm?" He glances away from the TV with a slow, glazed eye blink, eyes refocussing on her face. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Hiccup, pay attentionâ€|" she lets her fingers slide up his arm and tugs him closer by the shoulder seam of his tee-shirt. "I didn't say thank you, not really." Her fingers walk across the sharp line of his collar bone and down his chest, to land on his belt buckle with a sense of importance.

"You don't have to," he frowns at her knee, hand slipping down to a more demure roost against the slow curve of her calf. She yanks at his belt, thumbing it free of its second securing loop and looking at her carefully. "You're going to hurt yourself."

"No, I'm not," she shrugs, tugging a little more viciously at his belt. "Make this easier, and I'm even less likely to."

"I don't thinkâ€|" he pauses and looks her up and down, frowning at the brace and the way her comparatively skinny thigh tugs at something reactionary in his chest. "Why the suddenâ€|grabbing?"

"I'll grab what I feel like grabbing," she laughs, slipping her fingers underneath the waistband of his pants, thumbing his belt the rest of the way free.

"Come on, let's just watch this," he tries, and the defense feels utterly familiar, something he's used on what seems like a million late nights. Something about focusing makes Astrid frisky, and frisky sounds like it might hurt her knee. She winces slightly, as if on cue, the expression a ghost of pain flitting past the corner of her eye and he pauses, analyzing her face and trying to think about anything but the lithe fingers wiggling into his underwear. "See, this already hurts."

"Then kneel," she suggests, sitting up and patting the couch between them. "Help me out."

"Oh, so you're bored, and now you're going to molest me?" It's half of a joke, but his lower head likes the idea a little too much, lifting and attempting to escape his loosened pants.

"I'm saying thank you," she shrugs, scooting over towards him with a well-disguised wince when he doesn't follow her instruction. "Not molesting you, stop being so dramatic." Her forehead rests against the side of his ribs as she yanks the belt entirely loose and pops the button of his pants open with a practiced flick of her thumb.

"Astridâ€|"

"You can't even pretend you're uninterested," she unzips him and reaches her hand inside to cup the hard ridge aching to escape from the left leg of his jeans. "Unless this is how you always feel about Star Trek."

"Only sometimes," Hiccup shrugs, flushing and finally shifting his eyes away from the TV screen. "Seriously, don't hurt yourself."

"I'm not going to hurt myself," Astrid bites back a flinch as she reaches both arms forward, bracing against her good leg and trying to pull his pants down past his butt. Toothless raises his head from his nap on the other side of the room and Hiccup shushes him, cheeks bright red long after the wolf looks away and lays back down. "Little help here?" She yanks on his belt-loop until he shimmies the pants from under his seat and scoots the waistband down to his knees.

"Easyâ€|" he warns, glancing again at her sad, braced knee, but the effect is lost in the beyond pleasant way that his voice drops when she slides him out of the slit in his boxers and into her hand. He shivers at her cold fingers on the sensitive skin, relaxing into the couch nearly bonelessly when she wraps her hand properly around him and pumps slowly.

"For you or for me?" She asks with a laugh, kissing the tip of him and snickering at the oddly timed laser sounds from the TV that coordinate with her touch. Hiccup gasps as her tongue darts out and licks across his overheated skin and she slides the first inch into her mouth before slowly letting it slip out.

"Bothâ€|"

He reaches for the remote and pauses the TV.

"Hey," she looks up, somehow peeved at the sudden silence of the room. She can taste his skin on her lips and she licks them, breathing a little harder than she really should be. Her knee twinges, irritable about being forgotten.

"What?" He looks down, and it's a mistake when everything she promised to touch throbs at the image of her hand wrapped around him, her wet lips pouting up at him.

"I was enjoying the background noise," she shrugs, thumb tracing a slow circle. Her free hand slides underneath his ass, squeezing through the thin cotton of his boxers and he jolts into her grip.

Her knee shouts its presence, an unwilling third party, and she scowls in its general direction.

"Ok?" Hiccup asks, holding his breath as his being hovers in her unwittingly tightened grip.

"Fine," she smiles, but it looks more like a grimace and he gently plucks her wrist away from his lap, wincing at the initial resistance.

"Gripping a little tight there," he laughs, hand sliding up from her wrist to grip carefully at the cap of her shoulder. "Did it hurt?"

"Noâ€|" she insists, but her voice wavers as she shifts to sit up straight, lower back clenching as if to hold her together. "I'm

alright, really."

"Ok," he does his best to hide the unkempt wistfulness in his voice as he tucks his disappointedly softening self back into his underwear and tugs his pants back on. "That's obviously hurting, you're doing your pug impression."

"What pug impression?" She snaps, trying to uncrinkle a suddenly stubborn nose as she does her best to relax against the couch. "Come on, take your pants back off."

"How about I go get you another painkiller?" he offers, pushing to his feet and catching his balance with a hand on the back of the couch. "And then you can pick the movie?"

"I'mâ€" she pushes up with her palms, fingertips immediately turning a strained white as her knee twinges. "Alright, Iâ€"Sure."

"Ok, I'll be right back," he bends down and kisses the top of her head, breathing in the smell of her shampoo.

"I'm sorry," she shrinks down into the couch, looking purposefully at his still unbuckled belt before glancing back at his face.

"It's alright," he grins, shoulders slumping forward in muted disappointment. "I'll be right back."

"Ok," Astrid glares at her brace, adding a tick mark to the list of fun it hasn't allowed her to have.

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So, with that, I have a proposal for everyone. Midoriko-sama and I were talkingâ€|and it became apparent that there isn't a word for when the bow-chicka-wow-wow almost happens, but doesn't. So I would like to propose that we start calling that a **_melon**_**.

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**So go ahead and hate on me for both those melons, too quickly cut off by that damn brace. **

5. Chapter 5

**The response continues to be amazing, thank you everyone!

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Astrid groans, staring at her bank balance.

That can't be right, can it? That much money can't have disappeared into nothingâ€|

"Are you ok?" Hiccup asks from the table, frowning at a textbook.

"I'mâ€|" she sighs, reaching up and tugging her hair into a loose ponytail. She'd hoped that the numbers would make more sense without her hair dancing in front of her eyes, but they're just as grim, just

as small. Part time summer job savings, half spent on groceries and admittedly beer. She knew that it wouldn't be good, but she didn't realize just how bad it would feel. "I'm screwed."

"Why are you screwed?" He sets down his pencil and looks up at her, obviously concerned. She dares him to glance towards the bottle of painkillers on the table and he thankfully doesn't take her up on the challenge.

"So, even though I did get into grad school," she reminds him, as if it's really necessary. That's just not the kind of news that either of them would be forgetting anytime soon, after the interviews and the long discussions as to whether psychology would be beneficial for her, not just her future career. "I'm not exactly findingâ€"I'm starting to realize I have no idea how I'm going to pay for it."

"You're just thinking of that now?" Hiccup frowns, turning fully away from his homework. Astrid drums anxious fingers against her computer, chewing on the inside of her lip and wondering how to proceed.

Talking about money with Hiccup isn't easy. It's one of those rare things that he's never struggled with, yet she has, and as much as she loves him, she'll be the first to admit that sometimes his concept of a dollar is a little less than accurate. She guesses it's one of the brilliant curses of being an engineering student, but the past three summers, she's been stuck life guarding at a pool or dealing with summer crowds as a cashier at an ill-fated frozen yogurt shop while Hiccup has been machining and interning for fourteen dollars an hour.

And it's not that he doesn't save his money, it's that there always seems to be enough of it. Then again, he does still live with his father, and even though it does seem that Hiccup buys most of his own food and the occasional addition to his wardrobe, when he needs something big he could always ask.

Astrid stares at her brace and the hundred dollars that she owes Gerard and is absolutely resolved to pay back. At least she's on the athletic health plan by scholarship, and her MRI didn't end up ringing up a credit score murdering total.

"Obviously I've thought of it before," she leans forward and rests a still slightly clammy forehead against her palm. "I wasâ€"I was banking on actually taking some of those endorsement offers after the end of this season." She grimaces, staring down at her defective knee and swallowing hard.

Saucony. Mizuno. Girl Scouts. Most recently Nike.

She should have taken Nike up on the offer a few weeks ago when she was still basking in that victorious Worlds' glow.

"Ohâ€" Hiccup mumbles, tapping his metal foot anxiously against the floor.

"And don't even say it wasn't a solid plan, because I've gotten offers the past two years at Nationals," she feels like screaming it at the world outside. Like they're already forgetting about her,

letting her drift back into the ranks of all those nameless runners who never actually make it.

She made it, didn't she? She could still resume making it.

"I didn't say anything about it not being a solid plan."

He remembers holding Astrid's phone at Worlds, watching it ring in his hand as three companies left messages in foreign languages hoping for a spokeswoman.

"It was a stupid plan."

"You couldn't have known that this was going to happen," Hiccup reminds her, thinking back to all of those afternoons wondering what he would have done differently if he knew he would lose his foot.

He sure would not have spent that afternoon learning stick shift.

"But that's just it," Astrid shrugs miserably, shutting her computer and setting it aside, reaching for her water bottle with a wince. "I've always known this was going to happen, haven't I?" She laughs miserably, flopping back against the pillows and tugging her blanket up to her chin. "I always knew it was going to be the knee. The knee has been warning me for years and I just refused to listen to it."

"You didn't know," he comforts again, and it makes her want to curl up and disappear. She doesn't want to need this. She wants to feel independent.

She wants some cookies, or something, but her pride is far too damaged to ask Hiccup for that favor right now.

"I should have known," Astrid shakes her head, tapping her good foot against the arm of the couch and staring at that same boring spot on the ceiling. She swears she could sketch the bumps and grooves in that hideously familiar plaster from memory alone.

"So what are you thinking for school now?" Hiccup asks, voice light and gentle in a way that makes her wary. He's about to offer something, probably something too big and too overwhelming.

"I don't know," she groans, "do you think stripping would work out for me?" The joke falls out with a semi-surprised grin, and Hiccup frowns, unintentionally indignant.

"Seriously, you're already the good looking one. You can't be the funny one too."

"What if I'm not kidding?" She makes eye-contact, smiling briefly before the expression melts into something akin to surrender. "I don't know what I'm going to do. Iâ€¦I have an English degree, Hiccup. I can't teach with just an undergrad, what am I going to do? Spend the rest of my life writing tech manuals?" She sees it spin out in front of her, hours and hours of typing and boring rhetoric, bringing home a paycheck and studying in spare time that never gets any more plentiful.

"Astrid, you're already into graduate schoolâ€" "

"So I'm just going to get a few tens of thousands in student loans? Because that's not going to screw me for the rest of my financial future." She's never been placed at the bottom, advantages taken away.

"You have savings, you have a great GPA, you'll get scholarships and I'm sure my dad would be more than happy to helpâ€" "

"Yeah, and I can be whatever I want to be," Astrid rolls her eyes. "Save it."

"Fine," Hiccup snaps, turning back to his homework and scrawling down his variables like carving runes into the paper.

Astrid basks in the silence, stroking her fingers through her hair and feeling miserable.

"This is a mess," she mumbles. "I'm sorry for snapping at you."

"I wish you'd let me help," he sets that pencil back down and she feels like she's shrinking under his suddenly concentrated gaze.

"I don't want your money, or your dad's money," she thwarts what she's sure is his brilliant plan, and that foot starts tapping with an uneven click. "I wantâ€" | I wish I'd taken someone up on an offer after Worlds. I wish I'd forfeited this season."

"Come on, you would not have been able to sit by and watch your entire team run."

"It doesn't matter, I should have."

Hiccup sits silently for a moment, staring at the way she's diminished from even an hour ago, smaller and angrier than he's seen her in years. She's Astrid. She won't take anything she perceives to be a handout, and he's sure that's half the reason that they get along so well. Both of them are self-sufficient, content to stand next to each other, miraculously avoiding mutual suffocation even after this long.

"Do you think Nike would still be interested?" He suggests quietly and she scoffs, shaking her head and idly scratching Spike's ears as the pit licks at her arm, trying to comfort.

"I doubt it. It's not like I'm going to be doing anything athletic or amazing anytime soon."

"They have your Worlds footage, I'm sure."

"And nobody cares anymore, Hiccup," she sighs. "That opportunity passed, and I should have pounced, but I didn't."

"So you're just going to give up?" He affirms with an arched eyebrow that she doesn't bother to look at. Toothless grumbles encouragingly from his post by his master's legs. "I know you still have their e-mail address."

"You do not know that," she grumbles, thinking about the starred

and important contact at the top of her address book.

"I can guess." He picks up his pencil, contemplating his homework and her issues with equal weight. "Talk to them," he suggests with a shrug that somehow manages not to make her feel like the invalid she really is. "What's the worst that can happen?"

"They won't answer." Then she'll have to acknowledge her new nobody status. It'll suddenly be absolutely real and permanent. Lingered like a shadow, nagging at what was once so so close.

"Sounds like you don't have much to lose."

"Right."

She opens her laptop and starts to type, because he is right in a morbid sort of way. It can't get any worse.

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That Wednesday by the time that Hiccup gets home, Astrid is finally looking like herself. The color is back to her cheeks and she's finally fended off the last of the anesthetic haze, while giving up fighting her meds because as it turns out, she is smart enough to avoid prolonged pain despite its damage to her pride.

Hiccup slumps in the door, wearily patting Toothless's head and smiling to himself at Spike's obviously absent greeting. No matter the circumstances, the pit is really happy to have her girl at home for a while. He half expects her to be asleep, given the silence, but finds her laying back on the couch, headphones in her ears as she stares stony-faced at the ceiling.

"Astrid?" She doesn't look his way, and he wonders just how loud her music must be before shaking his head too fondly and walking over to rest a hand on her shoulder. She jumps, face crumpling as it disturbs her knee. "Sorry!"

"Huh?" She almost shouts, glaring at him. Spike springs to her feet and jumps onto the couch to hover over Astrid's torso, flapping an eager tongue at Hiccup's face overwhelmingly excited in that unabashed happy dog way. He pets her face with an absent hand, reaching down between her front paws to pluck away Astrid's ear bud.

"I said sorry for scaring you."

"Oh," she flushes, reaching down and turning off her music with an abrupt halting of drums. "You didn't scare me," she insists, snapping her fingers and ordering Spike off of her with a gentle murmur. The dog listens and falls back into a comfortable warm disk on the floor next to the couch.

It's only now that Hiccup notices the film of thin soft pitbull shedding on the spot, and vows to take Spike for a walk tonight so that she doesn't spend so much consistent time laying in one singular place.

He wonders how Astrid is faring in the same circumstance. Maybe he should leave the room, this could be dangerous and he has too much

homework for danger right now.

"Nothing good on TV?" He ignores her indignant claim and looks around for the remote. It's on the dining room floor, and it looks like _someone_ must have thrown it.

Someone mysterious.

"Have you ever realized that everyone's voice gets really annoying after a while?" She answers indirectly, scowling at nothing in particular.

"I can't say I have."

"Well it's true," she insists, pushing onto her elbows and sitting more elegantly than the day before. Her bad leg carefully turns to its alternate footrest on the coffee table and her other foot lands on the floor, instantly tapping and jittering. "And did you know that the stairs in this house are perfectly horribly spaced for crutches. Because that's true too."

Hiccup doesn't dare to remind her that he's seen five year olds more nimble on crutches than she is.

"I hadn't noticed." Her answering glare is absolutely scalding, and he backpedals. "Must be a leg-length thing. Or something."

"Right," she crosses her arms and pouts at the blank TV screen for a minute before frowning at her toes. One hand sheepishly pushes her incredibly messy bangs off of her forehead and she smiles sheepishly in his direction. "Oh, how was your day by the way?"

"It was alright," he smiles briefly before the fatigue of the last eight hours catches up to him. "I did an entire homework assignment the wrong way, and now I get to redo it," he laments, patting his backpack and walking around the coffee table to his dad's recliner, sitting down and relaxing with a long sigh.

"I'm sorry, that sounds like it sucks," she's obviously struggling with the sympathy at the moment, but the effort is appreciated. He smiles.

"At least I have your sunny face to come home to."

"So funny," she rolls her eyes and looks around the room, searching for something amazing that hasn't managed to pique her interest in these last eight hours of stillness.

Boring, boring stillness.

"I don't mind if you put in a movie or something while I work on this," he offers with a grin. "I'll even get the remote for you."

"You saw that?"

"How did it get into the dining room?" He asks with a laugh and she shrugs.

"The TV was annoying me and I threw it."

"How'd that work out for you?"

"Good." She snips, tapping her heel even faster against the floor and reaching for her water bottle with an awkward sideways stretch. She's definitely moving better than she has been, but he doubts that's a comfort.

If someone had told him a week ago that he'd be seeing Astrid curled in blankets and oversized clothes at the end of a wounded eight hour couch fest, he would have thought they were crazy. This is Astrid they're talking about. The girl who can't sit still for half an hour without falling asleep or getting on the floor to do sit-ups or crawling across his lap to kiss him.

He hasn't seen a full movie in years.

She looks downright fidgety, thankfully healthy flush in her cheeks being drowned by the frowning, frustrated twitching of her eyebrows. She stares at the ceiling and the floor, glancing briefly sideways at him before scanning across the row of movies on the bookshelf. He wonders just how many times she's read those today, and if she has the order memorized yet.

From her bored expression, he'd guess that she had it down within half an hour of him leaving.

She obviously managed to make it to the kitchen at some point. There's an empty cereal bowl and box of Girl Scout cookies on the coffee table, next to a miniature cityscape of three empty Pringles cans. It reminds him of high school, and the constant influx of nachos after track meets while she tried to keep full. That all changed in college, when she was the underdog again, and everything she put in her mouth became about efficiency and significance.

He still remembers the incredibly sad day when she turned down that first cookie in favor of a bland looking protein bar.

"Movie or no movie?" He asks again, interrupting whatever train of thought is bouncing around her head at the moment.

"Can we go for a walk or something?" She blurts, suddenly needy, and Hiccup sighs, looking down at his backpack.

"I really have to get started on this homework."

"How long do you think it's going to take?" She asks, carefully avoiding eye contact and wringing her hands together, looking for something to do. "I tried to go earlier, but the door was difficult," a glare towards her crutches, "and Toothless was no help at all. He wouldn't stop trying to jump on me and—" she trails off with a frustrated sigh.

"Ok—" he runs through his lengthy to do list in his mind. At least his design report draft should be relatively quicker with Astrid around to edit and do her magical comma-act that makes everything look like it was written by a full blown adult. "You will still help me edit my report later, right?" He double checks, wondering if she even remembers their agreement from Monday. He knows better than anyone how it is to be down; all the days start blurring together

like a smeared oil-painting, colorful and inarticulate.

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it," she smiles sadly to herself. "I'm three weeks ahead in my course work. I guess I never realized what a time-suck running can be."

While her mildly bemused tone is downright depressing, there's some seed of worrisome hope in 'can be.'

"It's only a few weeks," he reminds her, and neither of them mention the fact that she might not ever be as good again. "And just let me get through two problems, then we'll go for a walk, alright?"

Her answering smile is worth the sleep he's going to miss for that particular offer.

"And we're bringing Spike, I think she's aged three years worrying over me," Astrid looks down at her dog impossibly fondly, stroking her soft ears. Toothless butts his angular jaw under Hiccup's hands and smiles, expectant of his own petting.

Hiccup complies and rolls his eyes.

"She looks great for eight," he tells her, and Astrid smiles, scratching under Spike's chin. "There's a dog at this shelter I've been volunteering at sometimes who just turned twenty, and she can still kick my ass at tug of war." Astrid cocks her head and frowns at him.

"You didn't tell me you're back at a shelter."

"Oh," he sits up a little straighter, scratching his head. "I started...it's a new thing. Gobber told me about it a couple of weeks ago, and it's close to campus so it's easy enough."

"You haven't been there much," she thinks back and accounts for every increasingly boring day that he's been home right after class.

"It sort of got...derailed," he admits with a shrug.

"By me."

"And by school," he insists. "I'm not smart like you, I piled a bunch of hard classes onto my last semester."

"Are you ever going to learn not to procrastinate?" She tries to joke, but the frown never quite disappears from her face. It's nearly impossible for Hiccup to resist the urge to cheer her up, but there's something about this Astrid brand of determined sadness that he's given up on fixing over the years.

It's going to take more than just a few words to convince her that she's not some sort of unwanted time sink.

Like the homework currently weighing him down.

"Yes, I'm currently working on that," he pulls out his notebook, which is bulging awkwardly with his graphing calculator and pencil stuffed inside. "Seriously. Two problems and we'll go."

"Ok," she smiles slightly, looking at the table one last time with renewed interest before deciding on a well-loved paperback with impossibly cracked binding. She opens it to what appears to be a random page in the middle and starts reading.

Half an hour later, the first problem looks like it's supposed to, because apparently this pipe is experiencing three dimensional conduction and no one bothered to tell him until today. He scrawls a box around the answer with tired fingers and drops the pencil in his lap, stretching his arms upwards with an absolutely delightful pop in his lower back. The side of his neck tingles in that familiar way when he lets his hands fall back onto the chair and he looks to see Astrid staring at him.

"What?"

"Nothing," she shrugs, tapping her fingers against the book laid open on her lap. She's read at least fifty pages since he started doing homework, and he doesn't understand how she could have retained any of that. Or maybe at this point she's read the book so many times that it's just reliving a memory, rather than having a new adventure with every page.

"You're staring at me."

"Your shirt rode up," she tells him blankly, and that'd normally be a challenge. She doesn't say stuff like that unless she wants him to do something about it, but everything about her eyes holds him off. "Just looking," she assures him before turning back to reading with a morose sigh that he absolutely can't avoid responding to.

"What's up?" He asks, tone carrying more meaning than the simple question.

"I can't mphs mph," she mumbles unintelligibly, nose suddenly so far back in her book that all he can see of her face is furrowed eyebrows and haphazard blonde.

"English would be good."

"I can't do anything," she repeats a little louder, voice still mostly contained in its printed cage.

"No one expects you to do anything," he reminds her and the book falls back to her lap, revealing her flushed and stubborn face.

"I want to do things though," she challenges, crossing her arms and snarling at her own rare clumsiness as she swats her own book shut and onto the floor. "I want to go for a walk without begging you like some needy toddler, I want to do anything other than watch TV and reread books, and I want to do something about it when you're over there flashing me."

"Flashing you?"

"Yes, Hiccup, flashing me. Over there stretching in a shirt that rides all the way up to your ribs," she seethes at him like he stepped on Spike's tail. "It's ridiculous."

"I'll stop flashing you."

"That's not what I meant," she glares at him before bending down to pick up her cast aside book and cracking it open to approximately the right place, flipping around to get to the correct page and holding it there with a stiff thumb. "I just...I'm sick of needing help with every little thing," and her joking tone is gone.

"I don't mind helping you," he insists for what feels like the thousandth time in the past week.

"Come on, are you legitimately going to try and tell me that you _liked _it when I helped you out with your leg?" She poses the question with an arched brow that's determined that she's already won this barely sprouted argument.

Hiccup is tempted to agree with it.

"I hated you helping me," he admits and she smiles smugly.

"Because it made you feel useless and infantile like I do right now," she's not quite as smug as the words sink into her own ears like an audible brand.

Astrid and useless don't belong in the same sentence.

"Now, I'm glad that you helped me though," he continues quietly and she scoffs forcefully enough that Spike jumps up and tries to save her human from choking. "Seriously, how many times would I have fallen down the stairs? Or oh god, in the bathroom before we got the rails installed? I would have sent myself straight into another coma."

"Coma jokes still aren't funny," she turns to face him slowly, hesitant eyes flicking to the wall for a second before fixing on his face. She chews her lip for a moment before releasing it and exhaling with a shaky smile. "I'm starting to see the appeal of leg jokes though. This is serious enough without your dad staring at it like I'm dying," she gestures to her brace.

"At least I don't have anything to stare at," he gestures to the metal that should be blank space and Astrid shakes her head briefly.

"Not your best effort."

"I'm rusty," he grins, gesturing again to the metal, and her even look dissolves into an off-tilt sort of grin.

"It needs some work," she glances towards his homework, distantly pointed. "And you need to get back to work. I don't want to have to go for a walk in the dark."

"I'm on it, I'm on it," he rolls his eyes theatrically in response to her nagging and she turns back to her book. "And no more flashing you, I promise."

"I never asked you to stop flashing me," she grins.

It's like she doesn't actually want him to get anything done.

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Astrid is utterly convinced that her physical therapist is an absolute idiot. First, he tells her how to use crutches, as if it weren't obvious, telling her that if she's not careful she's going to hurt her shoulder. They're crutches, not weapons, how is she going to hurt herself with crutches?

Then, the guy has the audacity to give her advice. And not advice in areas where a physical therapist would have a particularly useful set of knowledge or anything. Advice in dealing with injury as an athlete, and coping with a new lifestyle.

And he had the gall to do it in front of Hiccup, who is apparently now the biggest supporter of all therapist rules, and has completely forgotten about all of those times she sat there and listened to him yelling that his psychiatrist was an idiot and he doesn't have late onset self-esteem issues because they've always been there.

Hiccup.

She looks at the bleachers next to her and seethes at him. He doesn't seem to notice as he's leaning closer to Fishlegs to talk above the din. Apparently it's good for her to see people, and do things, and go outside.

She personally thinks that her physical therapist is some sort of mind reader who uses his powers for evil and suggests that hurt people go work on that checklist of everything that they don't want to do. She's starting to sound like an insane person, and what worries her is that she really doesn't care.

They're at Ruff's field hockey game, and Fishlegs is trying to explain the rules, but Hiccup keeps `Fishlegs is going to be sainted sometime in the near future for that remarkable patience. One time, she tried to watch the world cup with Hiccup in the same room, and he went on for fifteen minutes about what technically constitutes a hand, for the sake of rules, and she thought she was going to murder him.

Astrid looks down at the teams warming up on the field, Ruff's nearly six foot tall stature distinctive among her stockier team mates. She has to admit that her friend looks ridiculously comfortable, heckling the other team's captain with a fist still taped from an incident in her last game that earned her a yellow flag.

That part is easy to watch. Funny even.

Everyone is running, jumping, stretching, and they aren't even grateful. That sounds horrible, probably is horrible, but Astrid is stuck. They don't know how lucky they are to be able to move and run and jump, and not have their boyfriend threaten to carry them up the stairs if they don't stop trying to be fancy on their crutches when they can't even walk in a straight line.

She can in fact walk in a straight line, it's Hiccup that leans left.

And now she's making leg jokes.

Maybe it is good for her to get out into the real world.

Hiccup still deserves to be punched for thinking an athletic event was a good idea though.

Idiot.

She turns to watch his and Fishlegs conversation, but finds them silent and staring at the field where the coin toss is starting. Hiccup catches her eye and wraps a long arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his side unthinking. She sighs and sits up straight, ignoring that temptation to lean into him, because even if she can't run or walk, she can at least sit on her own. His lips press briefly to her temple before he leans down slightly to mumble in her ear.

"Alright?"

"Fine," she shrugs.

"If you don't stop glaring at the field, there's going to be a fire hazard," he warns, and she's both peeved and gratified that he noticed.

"You noticed that?"

"It's hard to miss," he laughs against the side of her head and she flushes.

"I just really hate the other team," she covers weakly. "That's how this is supposed to work, Hiccup. I know this whole sports fan thing is beyond you, but you're supposed to hate the other team."

"We can go if you want to," he knows he should be insulted, but it's hard to take something to heart when all she did was explain the truth in a harsh tone. "Meet up with these guys after."

"I don't want to go," at least that's the truth, she does want to see Ruff do the serious damage she's famous for. She wants to enjoy this, it's just...hard when it's everything she should be and isn't anymore. "I wantâ€¦" she wants to go down and beat someone up, just to feel that rush. She wants to slap some athletic tape on her knee, pick up a stick and hit something with it. She wants to run. "I want some nachos."

Nachos are a decent alternate option. Especially if this concessions stand has that same almost cheese concoction as the football stadium, and it's so hot and spicy, dripping on those salty chipsâ€¦

Nachos may well be second best.

"Nachos?" He asks. "I'm offering a stable shoulder to lean on here, and you're thinking about nachos."

"The school's nachos are really good," she shrugs, looking at him hopefully and digging her wallet out of her purse. He waves her off and stands, smiling begrudgingly and waiting for Fishlegs to make room for him to get out.

Fishlegs has been doing an excellent job of ignoring them, and Astrid appreciates it more than the boy could know.

"Nachos for the lady, you want anything Fish?" Hiccup offers, stepping out and holding onto the stair railing.

"I'm alright," the blonde boy waves him off and he's down the stairs with an uneven rattle that digs a deeply hidden smile out of that secret soft spot in Astrid's chest. Fishlegs scoots a little closer to her and her grin fades as she prepares for another one of those chats about how her leg is doing.

She's only had a handful, but every single one of them managed to make her feel small.

"So, how has your week been?" She starts the conversation generically, and a green eyed monster springs in the back of her mind that her absence means Fishlegs has been staying over with Ruff every night in the otherwise empty dorm room. And she can't even sleep in the same bed as Hiccup because her nights are full of jittery, useless exhaustion and stacks of pillows to keep her knee up.

"It's been alright, fifty percent quieter without you around," he says simply and Astrid is oddly touched.

"Didn't realize I was so loud."

"It's mostly the unholy combination of you and Ruff. She keeps telling me everything she normally tells you, and I liked life better the other way," Astrid has to laugh at that, imagining Ruff breaking down Fishlegs' sexual performance to his face rather than later to Astrid's reflexively cringing ears.

"Well, that sounds more fun than my week," she shakes her head and stares out at the field, where Ruff is jumping elated with her team's obvious supremacy from the coin toss win. "Lots of daytime TV. The reality shows they're coming up with these days are insane."

"The showcase of a single miniscule socioeconomic subgroup for money is something I'll never understand," Fishlegs shakes his head and Astrid nods.

"Could not have said it better myself."

They sit in a comfortable silence for a few minutes until Hiccup comes back up the stairs brandishing nachos and what might be a churro wrapped in wax paper. He slides by Fishlegs, who scoots over to make a little more room, and sits down next to her, handing her the plastic basket of chips. It's not her proudest moment when she watches him peel down the edge of the paper and take a bite of his churro.

She doesn't know whether she wants to lick the cinnamon sugar off of the pastry or his mouth.

Her eyes flit between the options and she settles on a confident both.

"That's pathetic," Hiccup laughs after he swallows, holding the treat

in her direction. "Do you want some or something? Or are you just going to stare?"

"I'll have a bite," she ignores the insinuations and takes a bite, immediately realizing that she should have gone for the mouth option. Way more satisfying.

And of course she's started gawking at him again without even realizing it, and he's grinning like an absolute idiot, questioning her with his eyebrows. She scowls at him and eats a chip, turning back towards the field.

The game is fine. Not thrilling, not as depressing as she'd feared but also nowhere near as uplifting as Hiccup had hoped. It's just sort of there, it might as well be on TV except for the fact that she knows Ruff and it is a welcome break to be outside in the waning spring sun for a few hours. She's also not complaining about Hiccup's arm around her, or the gentle banter between the pair of them and Fishlegs.

Late into the second half, it's starting to get colder, and there's even that wonderful excuse to scoot closer into Hiccup's side without feeling needy. The brace does get in the way though, metal sides chilling her leg through the jeans she barely managed to struggle into earlier that evening. Her knee has gained three sizes while the rest of her remained the same, but she'd be lying if she said that the compression isn't nice, in its comforting suffocation. At least it feels like something denim-substantial is holding her leg together, rather than just some stitches and a clunky cage.

She shivers in spite of her best efforts and Hiccup's palm smooths up and down her arm, tucking her closer to his side as he talks to Fishlegs about some article on some super computer that she just can't get interested in.

Neither of them see it.

It's not Ruff, but it's the other team's answer to a bruiser who charges to swoop the puck from a smaller girl on the home team. Their shoulders collide. They jostle.

The smaller girl goes down with a wail and clutches at her knee.

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****Talk about close to home, right? ****

****Not much to say here besides it's odd to see Astrid down and outâ€|and there's something coming I've been dropping heavy hints for and I'm wondering if anyone can guess itâ€|As a hint I'll say that's a lot of junk food. ****

****And I'll get to responding to those last few reviews soon! Thank you all so much for your continued support. ****

6. Chapter 6

****Can I just say that Ruff is my favorite? Because she's my favorite.**

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"Astrid, it was a sprain," Ruff alerts her friend with a relieved smile, setting her phone on the bar table in between them and hoping to see any expression but the current catatonic glaze on Astrid's face. Hiccup smiles grimly at Ruff for the effort and pulls Astrid a little closer to his side, trying to be careful and make sure that her leg doesn't catch on the table.

"Are they sure?" Astrid asks, cradling her temples and resting her elbows on the table. She's still too pale, rocking slightly against the seat. "She went down hardâ€¦"

"Yeah, just a sprain. She just got out of an MRI, she's going to be fine." Ruff comforts, and even she is toned down in light of Astrid's pale face.

The home team won.

"It looked like it wrenched and twistedâ€¦" Astrid waves her open and shaking hands around an invisible sphere, exhaling shakily.

"Where is Fish with those beers?" Ruff asks too loudly with a nervous smile, looking around for her boyfriend. "Am I right?" She directs this question towards Astrid, who doesn't answer because she's trapped staring at the wood grain of the table. Hiccup looks older than usual, jaw clenched and nervous while he strokes her arm through her jacket, his metal foot tapping on the floor and only adding to the nervous atmosphere.

"I have no idea," he says through tense lips, briefly looking around the room before settling his eyes back on Astrid's face.

"Well, why don't you go look for him?" Ruff suggests with a pointed smile, glancing at Astrid and shooing him as silently as she can. Hiccup responds by holding his critically upset girlfriend a little closer and glaring at Ruff.

"I'm sure he can find his way back." Ruff rolls her eyes.

"Yeah, and he's one guy getting _four_ drinks with _two_ hands. Why don't you go help him?" She proposes again.

"Ruff-

"Astrid will be fine for thirty seconds, Hiccup," she drawls obviously and Astrid looks up at the sound of her name, nodding even though no one is sure that she actually heard. "See look at her. Perky."

"Ruff-

"That's my name, now go," she points towards the bar with hard eyes and Hiccup hesitates, looking at Astrid concerned. Even now she glares at the concern she most likely perceives as condescension.

"I'm fine, Hiccup," she mutters, obviously lying to save face, but

Ruff jumps on the comment.

"See, so perky. Go."

"I'll be right back, Astrid," he tells her, doing his best to ignore Ruff rushing him as he uncoils his arm from around her and stands.

"Yeah," Astrid nods, mostly to herself, staring at her fingers spread on the table. Hiccup resolves to hurry.

As soon as he's out of sight, Ruff looks to her friend and snaps her fingers to get the girl's attention.

"It's a sprain Astrid, not like you."

"She went down so hard," Astrid's voice is uncomfortably small and in a rare moment of genuine compassion, Ruff reaches across the table and grabs her hands.

"She's my teammate, I know what a drama queen she can be."

"Does...Did I go down harder than that?" Astrid asks, hands clenching into fists inside of Ruff's larger, grass stained ones.

"Probably. But you slipped, so it's not like someone tackled the shit out of you."

"Eloquent," Astrid snips and Ruff grins.

"You know what else happened? When you fell, you got your ass up and tried to keep running, because you're insane," Ruff adds with a hint of admiration in her voice. Her palms come down with a gentle but bracing thud on the back of Astrid's still clenched fists. "You are the craziest bitch I know."

"I wonder if her knee made a noise...mine did," Astrid admits like it's a shameful sort of secret, swallowing thickly against her suddenly too dry throat. "It was like tearing paper and it was the only soundâ€¦"

"Remember Evil Demon 6?" Ruff asks with a smile, trying not to imagine a ripping, wrenching noise coming from her own joint .

"With that-with the hair guy?" Astrid affirms, and Ruff nods. Living with Ruff has denatured their relationship into obscure references and half conversations that make perfect sense. That feeling of sisters is stronger than ever.

"Yeah, and the demon is eating those _fingers_ that were obviously pieces of Twinkies in cherry syrup?"

"Are you going somewhere with this?" Astrid asks.

"And there's that guy, and he's screaming because the demon henchmen are ripping off his fingers and there's all that tearing and crunching," Astrid nods, stomach churning from the description more than the B movie memory. "I remember I was looking away, because it was a little too disgusting, and you were over there, under that

hideous blanket you stole from Tuff, calling the guy a wuss and saying that losing a couple fingers wouldn't kill him."

"Well, he had to get out of there and go save the chemical plant," Astrid nods like it's the most simplistic reasoning she's ever thought of and Ruff grins.

"Exactly. This thing isn't going to kill you, alright? And even better, you're out of the demon's lair, fingers already gone. And you've got a lot of shit left to get done."

Astrid mulls over her friend's encouragement and Ruff grins at the fact that Astrid is closer to her usual golden-pink, rather than that horribly pasty green from a few moments before.

"Where are they?" She leans over and looks around, searching for Fishlegs' towering shoulders, or Hiccup's auburn mop. "Because I am thirsty."

"Tell me about it," Ruff stands halfway and scans the crowd. "I'm the one who spent all that time running around and kicking butt while you sat around on your ass."

"Don't complain to me about running," Astrid warns her friend, miffed in her corner of the booth. "I would have done all that running for you."

"Great, when do you start?" Ruff asks, shoving the imaginary object that is her running responsibilities across the table towards Astrid.

"I need six weeks' notice," Astrid reminds her friend with a wry smile just as an earnestly nervous Hiccup and Fishlegs pop through the crowd. As soon as Hiccup sees Astrid's considerably more normal face, he grins and sets a tall beer in front of her, sliding into the seat next to her and wrapping an arm around her back. As he squeezes embarrassingly hard, it's obvious that the contact is more for his benefit than hers, but it's still pleasantly leveling. "I'm fine," she mumbles at him, trying and failing to sound peeved as he gratefully kisses the side of her head.

"_What_ did you two talk about?" He'd left looking forward to a long night of careful prodding and prying, alternated with as much comforting as she'd accept. Not that he would have minded, but it's eternally better to come back to a smiling Astrid.

"Evil Demon 6. " Hiccup sits up and looks at her strangely. She takes a long sip of beer, smacking her lips against the refreshingly hoppy taste. "You'd hate it. All gore and no substance."

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Saturday morning, the familiar ceiling plaster almost looks like a smile. Not even a generic smiley face, but an actual smile, with incisors jutting forwards a bit more prominent than they should be. Hiccup clicks the butt of his pen irritably against the dining room table, scratching something out with a defeated flourish.

"How's it going?" Astrid asks innocently, giving up on reading for the moment and resting her book face-down on her stomach.

"I'm close it's justâ€¦negativeâ€¦compressive forcesâ€¦" he trails off, humming almost victoriously a second later and resuming writing. The scratch of his pen evens and lengthens and she can tell he's sketching something.

If she had to guess, she'd say from his tone that he's still stuck on the knee for the perpetually half-finished prosthetic dog leg in the garage. He has a folder that's almost always with him that's full of at least forty near identical sketches, all labeled in his neatest handwriting.

He mumbles inarticulately, voice peaking hopefully before dropping back to its normal timber and almost harmonizing with rapid fire typing on his calculator. Astrid wishes for her headphones for what feels like the millionth time in the last hour, because frankly the sweet sounds of Hiccup working are making her terribly nervous. His anxious haste brought on by his project's quick approaching deadline is giving a voice to all those things that she should be doing.

Running.

She should be running.

If not, she should be talking about running or thinking about it in an actually constructive capacity, rather than focusing on how horribly still her feet are. She should be worried about her team, and her times, and the fact that nationals are so close she can almost taste it.

The smile in the plaster seems to widen, at once menacing and deeply sympathetic. A step- parent keeping her home for her own best interest, unenthusiastic about playing bad cop.

Her knee, letting her lounge around and feeling disregarded at her thankless attitude about the whole production.

When her phone first rings she mistakes it for a phantom vibration, an eager nerve ending coming back to life as her pain meds wear off and warning her that it's about to start complaining. But her phone buzzes again, hard plastic case pressing against the top frame of her brace and rattling. It takes a minute to find it in the tangled blanket, and when she finally holds it up, the name on the caller ID makes her pause.

Why would Mia, a sophomore on her team who trains 5k's with her, be calling right now?

Her immediate first thought is that someone else got hurt and that this is an attempt to summon her back into action. An unnecessarily sly hand tugs the blanket over her partially revealed brace as she holds the phone to her ear and answers.

"Hello?" She clears her throat, suddenly aware that she likely doesn't even sound like herself.

"Oh, sorry, did we wake you?" Mia sounds concerned, and a few mumbles behind her echo the sentiment.

"No," Astrid relaxes into the couch before the posture feels strangely out of context and she decides to sit back up, awkwardly half vertical so that her knee can remain elevated. "What's up?"

"We need directions to your house, we have your get well package," the girl explains brightly and Astrid grins in quiet relief.

Get well packages were something that she started her sophomore year when a teammate landed in the hospital after a bad car accident, and it's oddly inspiring to see someone carrying out the tradition. Her good foot swings over the side of the couch and makes comfortingly solid contact with the plush carpet.

"I'm at Hiccup's house right now," she maintains that longtime ruse and Hiccup looks her way at the sound of his name. Someone catcalls in the background on the other end of the line and Astrid smiles. "But I don't think he'd mind if you guys came by?" It comes out as a question posed in Hiccup's direction and he shrugs his assent, turning back to his newest sketch with renewed determination.

"We don't want to interrupt your Henry time," Mia laughs, shushing what Astrid presumes is another cat call. Astrid glances back at the strong line of his shoulders, skinny spine moving under his shirt, and smiles to herself.

Lots of Hiccup time. That's the only plus.

"Don't worry about it, I'll just be glad for someone _else _to talk to," she jokes and Hiccup shoots her a playful glare over his shoulder. "Where are you guys now?"

"Just left Boulder," Mia mutters to someone and breathes quietly into the receiver before talking. "Andi has her GPS ready, so we just need the address."

"Awesome," Astrid relays the information and has Mia read it back to her before hanging up with a promise to see them in half an hour. It's indescribably wonderful just to have something to do, somewhere to be. For the faintly glowing numbers on her watch face to mean something again.

"So who's coming over?" Hiccup asks as she stands and tucks those absolutely heinous crutches under her arms.

"A few teammates," she hobbles over behind him and kisses the top of his head because neither hand is free to pat a shoulder.

She doesn't dwell on how momentarily right it feels to consider herself part of that team when she no longer deserves it.

"Funâ€|" he pauses to finish a calculation with quick, expert fingers that are unbelievably sure of his calculator's worn buttons. "Do you want me to work in my bedroom so that you guys can talk?"

"I'm not going to kick you off of the table," Astrid rolls her eyes, glancing at the spread of paper across the dining room table. Some are typed, but everything is equally annotated with dense scrawl in two or three different people's handwriting.

She hates seeing him this stressed and drops another chaste kiss onto

his hair, as if it could possibly help anything.

"No," he laughs, "that was my polite way of avoiding the girly talk. I always feel like I'm betraying my gender." He writes an equation that takes up the entire length of his paper, squeezing symbols against the far margin with a pen whose line suddenly seems too thick. She recognizes about half the letters as Greek, but to the untrained eye, there are at least three different kinds of V's.

"We'll go out back then, it's a nice day. Maybe play some fetch with the dogs." Toothless's head pops out from under the table at the mention of his favorite game and Hiccup pauses to pat the broad, black head. Spike squeaks excitedly from the other room, collar jingling as she springs to her feet.

"Thank you," he sighs, looking straight up at her, top of his head resting against her stomach, all green eyes and static-infused hair. "This is justâ€¦" A sweeping, disheartened gesture towards the table. "I just need to finish one more thing today. I'll be more interesting tonight, I promise."

"Don't worry about it," she brushes it off with a worried frown, hopping a step backwards on wobbly crutches. "Get some sleep and we're even."

"You're the best," he calls after her, words mostly directed at the table, muffled by the time they reach her hobbling towards her room. She doesn't want to alarm her teammates who are coming to see Astrid by presenting them with a pale-faced photocopy.

After managing to squeeze the only pair of not athletic shorts she owns over her brace with minimal swearing and pulling on a clean shirt, Astrid limps across the hall to the bathroom. The girl in the mirror isn't quite familiar, pale and somehow softer than she's ever really been before. Maybe it's in the slightly groggy blue eyes, rimmed with dark circles and eclipsed by meds that seem to be permanently making their way out of her system. But it seems more likely it's in the set of her shoulders, slumped over crutches because she really will fall without them.

With her precarious balance it takes a good ten minutes to wash her face and detangle the birds nest on her head that had the audacity to call itself a braid, but the effort is worth it. If she doesn't look quite like Astrid, she's a close second.

The doorbell rings when she's halfway back down the hallway and despite the fact that she does try to hustle, Hiccup beats her to it, pen rolling lazily off of the table as he holds the door for a stream of four girls holding one sizable box. Spike runs eagerly to greet them, tail wagging excitedly and accepting minimal petting before she runs to the back door and begs shamelessly for fetch.

Toothless peeks out from under the table, looks at the pen, and looks up at Astrid, tilting his wide head.

She pauses and limps forward, thinking about picking it up. She can't. She can't pick a pen up off of the floor.

Her team is about to see her and she can't bend over without falling.

Toothless seems to pick up on her distress and whimpers low in his throat, nudging her brace and the skin underneath with a cold wet nose.

"I'll go get her," Hiccup's voice catches her attention and she hops away from the pen like it'll make her look less pathetic. Hiccup smiles at her when he walks in, most of the group behind him shielded by the doorway and his shoulders. "Your friends are here."

"Yeah," she bites her lip, adjusting her bare toes against the wood floor. "Your pen fell and I can't"

"I got it," his smile doesn't falter as he stoops and picks it up, setting it on the edge of the table. "See you in a bit, I'm here if you need anything," he reminds her, looking at her solidly for a moment like he can almost see that something is wrong before drifting back to the problem on the table.

"See you," she nudges him with a kind shoulder on the way out and bracing herself for the looks that her team is probably going to give her.

Probably pity. A good side of shock at her pallor and general lack of solidity.

When she steps around the corner, they all smile.

"Wow, you look great!" Mia steps forward to hug her but pauses with a glance towards the crutches. Astrid smiles and holds out an arm as best as she can, welcoming the younger girl in for a quick, exceedingly gentle hug.

"Don't lie to me," Astrid laughs, back popping as she pulls back and stands up a little straighter.

"We didn't expect you to even be up." Mia doesn't look back at the crutches, and it's a relief. "Then again, it is you," everyone laughs in response and Astrid shrugs a shoulder towards the patio door, wishing she could point. Spike tap dances at the gesture, whimpering towards a tennis ball outside that is so far away.

"Mind if we go outside? Hiccup is swamped with a project and I promised we'd be quiet," she laughs and Hiccup's thankful gaze pours into the back of her neck, clear as day. "Plus, I promised the dogs fetch." Spike howls.

Toothless finally abandons Hiccup, because fetch does seem closer now, and trots into the room, brightly expectant eyes trained on Astrid like he can ensure her follow through by staring at her hard enough. Spike paws at the door.

"That always freaks me out," Andi laughs, looking down at Toothless, so obviously light on her feet that it looks like she could fly away. Astrid almost pauses to ask her how the drive was, but then remembers that the girls' sedan outside is a stick. She can drive with two feet and Astrid can't walk and a miserable wave of jealousy crushes the words before they ever make it out.

"Right? He's so big," one of the other girls steps forward into the room and kneels so heartbreakingly easily, scratching Toothless under the chin. Rita is a freshman from one of the I-statesâ€"Indiana maybe?â€"and if Astrid were going to be doing this a few more years she'd be genuinely intimidated by the younger girl's three thousand.

She's not going to be doing this anymore.

Her team will still have a solid competitor in what used to be her best race.

Spike whimpers impatiently from her roost in front of the still _closed_ doors.

"I'll throw another ball for Spike if you want me to, Astrid," Megan, the last girl, offers, and she's the first to shuffle towards the pit, practically floating on the balls of her feet. So athletic without even trying that Astrid remembers what she used to look like.

One time, Astrid brought Spike to a team retreat at someone's family cabin, and she bonded with the usually tremendously quiet girl. Astrid had been worried about her, because she showed up as a talented freshman and very few immediate friends, but once Megan met Spike she opened up to Astrid a bit.

No one here is older than a sophomore, and it strikes Astrid that her older teammates must have realized that she's _weak_ now.

"She would love that," Astrid smiles, starting her slow and methodical hobble across the room and trying not to blush when everyone keeps her gimping pace.

Mia steps ahead and opens the door, laughing and dodging the streaking bullet of pitbull that almost takes out her ankles in her race to the tennis ball. She beats Toothless to the prize and flaunts her win, shaking her head pseudo-menacingly as Astrid steps outside. Spike trots up to her girl's feet and drops the ball.

But of course she can't pick it up any more than she could pick up Hiccup's pen.

"Spike, come here," Megan catches onto the problem and stoops down, patting her thighs. "Bring it here, girl, I'll throw it." The dog eagerly sprints to her new best friend and Astrid takes the opportunity to slouch into the nearest lawn chair with as much dignity as she can muster.

Toothless digs a muddy ball from a corner of the yard and drops it into her hand like a hard won prize, bowing in preparation for her to throw it. Astrid tosses it towards the tree-line, wincing when the motion dugs at one of the whiny tendons in her knee.

"Package," Andi reminds her, setting the box on the arm of Astrid's chair and moving to lean back against the deck railing. "Before I eat it all myself."

"Eat it?" Astrid grins, pulling the package onto her lap and opening

the lid to reveal a smorgasbord of quality junk food and a tee-shirt from the meet that she missed the day before. Her heart clenches at the shirt and an embarrassingly large part of her wonders if it would fit Hiccup so she could spare herself the heartbreak of wearing it. "Thank you guys."

"Everyone else wanted to come," Rita laughs, trying to pry a now slobbery ball from Toothless's playful jaws. "But they're still at the meet, some races got delayed until todayâ€the finals mostly," she frowns and looks at the small crowd, who all return her disappointed expression. "Somehow I thought that there were more than four of us."

"There's a card in there too," Mia nods towards the box and sits down in the chair nearest Astrid, grinning when she finds the blue envelope.

"Nice," Astrid laughs at the 'get well soon' card featuring a shirtless man with a stethoscope on the front, offering to check her pulse. The laugh fades in her throat when she opens the cover to a near solid wall of signatures and well wishes.

'We miss you's and 'Feel better's peppered across the page in at least six different ink colors, orbiting a longer signature from her coach telling her to take her time and not worry. At least her coach knows her and seems to still respect her. That alone takes a weight from her chest, and the air seems denser.

"It was between the hot nurse and the hot fireman," Andi grins. "But we figured that you're spending more time with nurses."

"Thank you guys," Astrid carefully slides the card into its envelope, placing it in the box and folding her arms across the lid. "Seriously."

"It was fun," Rita finally succeeds in pulling the ball away from Toothless and throws it, sending him sprinting after it.

From the back, when he's really running, his limp is invisible .

"Yeah," Mia nods, "Everyone chipped in before we left and Megan picked out most of it." Megan smiles briefly over her shoulder before throwing the ball again for a delightedly out of breath Spike.

"Sorry we couldn't do it sooner," Andi shrugs, scratching Toothless's head bravely. She still doesn't hazard to yank the ball from his mouth and he trots back to Rita to continue that favorite game.

"No, don't be," Astrid shakes her head, "I was out of it anyway and you guys had to train."

"Fat lot of good that did us," Andi scowls at the ground, toeing a slot in the deck. "I choked in the 10k, ran a 37:52. I was only top thirty; I haven't been that horrible since I was a freshman in high school."

"Better than me," Rita frowns, arm going slack in her battle with Toothless. "I tripped off the start of the 3k. Like an

idiot."

"Coach put me in the 3k instead of you," Mia mopes, wrinkling her nose and staring at Spike racing across the grass. "He knows that's not my best race. I can't do anything in that amount of time, I need the last mile."

"I did alright," Megan offers sheepishly, throwing Spike's ball without nonsense instead of teasing her like Gerard is so game to do. "If ninth place is alright when the final is the top _eight_."

"Bad days happen, guys," Astrid comforts, her brace flirting with the corner of her field of vision like an unwanted suitor. "Is everyone already qualified for regionals?" She checks, fretting over her own lonely spot and wishing she could give it to one of the girls in front of her instead of watching it go to waste.

Three of the girls nod and Andi shrugs, more angry than disappointed.

"If I stopped _choking_â€|" Astrid has seen that face before, a little more blonde, with blue eyes instead of green, but it must have stared back at her from a thousand mirrors. A thousand mirrors that she looked in way too often, but that was another problem entirely.

"Are you running fast in practice?" She asks, good foot trembling like Spike with a tennis ball at the thought of laps on a red clay track.

"Almost always under thirty six," the girl shakes her head, tapping an enviably nimble right heel on the railing behind her. "But I get to a meet and there's that _gun_ andâ€|blah. I sprint off of the start and then I'm exhausted 10 laps in. It's ridiculous."

"Have you ever met Josie?" Astrid asks, smiling in spite of herself at the thought of the spritely spitfire. She should call her soon, she's sure that the girl would find this entire situation hilarious. She could go for someone laughing at her instead of sobbing for her. "She's like a tiny elf with a megaphone? Goes to Oklahoma?"

"The one you almost murdered when she stole your phone during your race?" Rita laughs at the memory of a red faced, barefoot Astrid sprinting down the sidelines and tackling the smaller girl to the ground.

"Yeah, her."

Maybe she won't call Josie. She might take the phone.

"What about her?" Andi asks, more perturbed than she's letting on as she looks at Astrid like a last hope.

"She runs the first half of her 10k's at a 33:00 pace, try and stick with her in Idaho. I think that Oklahoma is coming."

She knows Oklahoma is coming. The last time she and Josie had a race together, they ended up hanging out together afterwards, and Astrid woke up in hotel room with the wrong team, wearing someone else's jersey and clutches a half-empty bottle of something pink and

tremendously strong.

Josie thought the entire thing was hilarious when Astrid shook her awake. Astrid then memorized every time they'd intersect that season in an attempt to prevent a repeat.

That was a waste of time.

"Thanks Astrid," Andi sighs, relaxing slightly, even though she still looks pissed off at the world. "That might be easier."

"I hope it helps."

"How long are you on crutches, anyway?" Rita asks, finally standing up straight as Toothless lays down, blissfully exhausted at the edge of the yard, ball still in his mouth.

"Sometime next week, probably," Astrid frowns, choosing not to think about those ever-unpleasant meetings with her physical therapist. The man is all flexibility and time, when she craves power. "I don't know exactlyâ€¦it's prettyâ€¦" "I actually messed it up this time."

"I remember last year, it was my first big meet," Mia smiles fondly, "you were all taped up from your first race and someone couldn't run the 10k, and we needed one more person for them to count a team score. You were at the starting line before you even asked coach, and then your knee was making that grinding noise the whole rest of the night."

"I should have been easier on it," Astrid snorts, patting her leg like the child she's not supposed to dislike. "It chose a hell of a time to crap out, too."

"It happens to everyone," Megan interjects sadly, looking down at her own legs.

The pause is awkward and too long, full of magnetic gaping at Astrid's leg that she can't really expect them to avoid.

"I have a question," Rita breaks the silence with an almost shy grin. "When did Henry get so cute? I thought we were at the wrong house for a minute."

Everyone laughs and the conversation takes a happier path, away from running and the injuries that it causes, and towards the mundane parties and events she's been missing. It makes Astrid want to go back to school at the same time as it makes her so glad for these few weeks of sitting on the couch with her dog, turning in assignments remotely and healing. It starts to get dark and Andi urges everyone to head out, sheepishly remembering that one of her headlights doesn't work.

No one offers to help Astrid up, and she feels like she belongs somehow, an elder in a tribe of fleet-footed girls.

On their way out the door, Astrid grabs Megan's arm and pulls her aside in the entry way, waving goodbye to the other girls and making up some lie about helping her with a paper.

"What's up?" Megan asks, eye contact finicky as she pets Spike's head

and glances between Astrid's face and her package sitting on the couch behind them.

"It doesn't happen to everyone," Astrid admits, biting her lip and nodding as the difficult words in her head assure her that they're the right ones. "I could have taken better care of it, sure, but I had a defect on my cartilage. It was always there, and I'm just unlucky. Your knees are going to be fine, alright?"

"I broke my ankle falling off a bike when I was seven," Megan mumbles, Spike's silky ear slipping through her fingers. "It's not as strong as it used to be."

"Then if it hurts, stop and get help, alright?" Even though Astrid knows she would have never taken her own advice, it still feels right. "No sense in being a hero."

"I want to run like you. You practically are a hero," Megan says it with that high-school reverence that always felt wrong even when Astrid thought she deserved it.

"I don't even run like me anymore," she peers out the door and gently punches Megan in the arm, pulling her face straight. "I'll see you soon, you better go before they ditch you here and Hiccup has to give you a ride. Toothless gets the front seat."

"Alright," Megan manages a small smile and effortlessly edges towards the door. "Feel better, Astrid."

"Working on it."

Astrid sits back down on the too quiet couch and opens her package, staring at the blank TV and tearing through a package of Oreos almost quickly enough to be embarrassing. Almost.

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**So, a lot of you have been asking for a lemon, and I can promise they're coming, I'm doing my best to work even more of them inâ€|but for now, I'd like to invoke the major surgery pass. **

**This wasn't some little clip and snip, Astrid is pretty messed up, and I'm trying to give it believability by not having everyone jump into the sack the next day. She's healing, give her time.

>

**Lemons will follow. **

**Please tell me what you thought of this chapter! I really want to hear everyone's ideas, I'm so enjoying hearing your predictions and thoughts for how this is going! **

7. Chapter 7

**Thank you for all your feedback! Please keep it coming.
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"But I've got this hinge problem, you know?" Hiccup babbles on, hands drawing in the air in front of his face as he keeps his pace purposefully slow. Astrid hobbles along beside him on her crutches, breathing far harder than he's used to hearing. "It's got this over-rotation that's going to throw his opposite shoulder off, and the motor can't seem to hold up to the extra pressure." Hiccup complains, wandering a little too fast down the road. Astrid clears her throat and he looks back at her, eyes still lost in whatever he's been mapping out. "Hmm?"

"Walking a little fast there?" She tries not to sound bitter, but everything about her slow, hopping gait is deeply, internally offensive.

"Oh! Sorry," he plants his feet pointedly and she catches up with three planted crutches, peering over his shoulder towards the house now fully visible at the top of the hill. "Can you make it the rest of the way, or do you want me to go get the car?"

"Of course I can make it," she snaps, hopping a bit on her good foot to adjust her stance. It's Monday after Hiccup finally got home from school, and she finally managed to win the fight for a longer walk. He's been talking her into these quarter mile strolls for the past couple of days, and eventually being sick of the coddling overcame the ache of her crutch-sore armpits.

She's sick of the coddling in every respect. She's sick of feeling behind and under and everywhere but ahead. First it was the constant insistence on getting everything for her. She's sick of needing help with everything.

Just that morning, she had the bandages off of her brand new scar and she couldn't help but be a little less than pleased with the wide puckering groove. Scars are signs of battles won, and she gets that. Ruff was so thrilled a couple of years ago when she tackled an opponent into the bleachers and cut her shin through to the bone on a rough piece of sheet metal. Her team won and she bragged about that scar for months, it still comes up when she needs to prove how tough she is. It's a great scar too, flat and shiny, standing out just enough to look tough but not thick enough to tug at her skin and make a nuisance of itself.

Astrid's isn't a battle scar. It's a reminder of a single mistake, of a minute moment of clumsiness that turned into something permanent.

She almost misses last week, when all anyone expected of her was to lay around and keep swelling down. At her last doctor's appointment, she was too preoccupied by her physical therapist's utterly unsolicited social advice to really comprehend this next stage of healing. It's full of flexibility, and getting her knee motion back.

She should be excited, she should be absolutely eager to get that leg straight and put it on the ground. Everyone is making it sound like she's already behind, because most athletes have their leg straight by a week post-surgery, and it took everything within her to not remind everyone in the room that her PCL was damaged as well, and it's not like she could come out high-kicking.

Luckily, she had Hiccup to say that much for her.

High-kicking comments included .

Still, straightening a leg doesn't seem like anything. This morning she was absolutely sure that it would be a non-event. That she'd be so happy to take that brace off and stretch everything would snap straight of its own accord and she'd be on the fast lane to recovery.

In reality, it didn't straighten. She held a strap against the sole of her foot to push against, just like the therapist showed her only a few days ago and tried. It hadn't worked at the doctor's office, because she was cranky, and she wasn't trying, but honestly the bend doesn't look much different with all the effort in the world behind it.

"You ok?" Hiccup turns around and starts walking backwards, and Astrid hasn't wanted to punch him so much in years. He can walk backwards, uphill faster than she can limp along, and he doesn't even look like he feels bad about it.

She hates that she _wants_ him to feel bad about it.

"I couldn't get my leg straight this morning," she admits, chewing on the inside of her cheek and staring at the ground, failing in her refusal to be embarrassed.

"I thought you'd want help," Hiccup frowns, missing her point entirely and she scowls.

"It doesn't matter. It wouldn't straighten," she snaps and he sighs, taking an absolutely audacious half step down the hill towards her and she scoffs, plodding forward with a click of her crutches. Her arms hurt, this is exhausting.

"What do you mean it wouldn't straighten?" He clarifies, and it's oddly gratifying that he spends a couple of long steps catching up to her.

"I mean that I tried to straighten it, and it wouldn't straighten all the way," she repeats, and it sounds impossibly worse this time.

"We can look at it when we get back, if you want."

"No thanks," Astrid snips, eyes fixed on the waning hill ahead of them. Spike and Toothless are waiting by the edge of the side yard fence, wagging excitedly, but it does nothing to improve Astrid's mood.

She tripped yesterday on Toothless, and it wasn't his fault, not really, but the fact is two three legged gimps in a hallway isn't exactly safe or elegant. The worst part was when Hiccup got all stern, and brought the wolf aside to lecture him in that fatherly way that only Hiccup would ever deem appropriate for talking to a dog.

"Maybe it'll be easier if I just helpâ€" Hiccup pursues the offer and Astrid scowls at him before fixing her eyes back on the

house.

"I don't exactly want to show it off."

Hiccup falters, glancing at her knee and back to the side of her always beautiful, determined expression. She adjusts her ill-placed arms on her crutches and continues forward, staring down at that well-worn running shoe that's practically mocking her.

"I'm assuming it is a scar," he hedges, and she stops in her tracks, almost stumbling and planting her crutches defiantly.

"They cut my knee open, it's a massive scar," she calls upon condescension that never quite draws to the surface entirely. "I love scars." She looks down past her running shorts towards the twin slashes ingrained in the outside of her good calf.

Worlds Trials was a pretty big meet for a novice mistake like getting spiked, but she still pulled through and won that race. One of the most oddly satisfying moments of her life was watching the biohazard team spray bleach on the track in a mad rush before the next race, trying to eliminate her blood trail.

"What? You aren't going to make me admire this one?" Hiccup asks, stepping up to her. "Because I very distinctly remember trying to hug you after you finished your race, and you shoved your bleeding calf into my hands, babbling about how great the scars would be."

"I don't babble."

"You do when you just qualified for an international meet with a personal best time."

"I was excited," she defends, leaning away from him. "And— and those scars came from winning something. It's a little different when you're all scarred up from losing everything—"

She stops mid-syllable.

Back when everything was worse, wool-covered and secretive, she— she didn't— She ignored him and made him feel horrible about a scar he couldn't help. A scar that didn't perturb her in the slightest.

"Tell me more," Hiccup snarks through a gentle smile and Astrid's mouth flaps soundlessly.

"It's ugly, and I don't want you to see it," she starts and Hiccup nods. "And it's curved around my patella to avoid the swelling that was going on there, and it's— it makes my knee look asymmetrical." She blurts and he laughs at that assessment. "And I shouldn't care but— it's a scar that doesn't matter."

"Lucky for you, I only like asymmetrical legs."

"Birds of a feather."

"What do you mean that it doesn't matter?" He asks after a quiet moment, hand landing in a supportive way that she can't quite hate against her waist.

"It's a stupid scar. This whole thing is stupid. I fell for no reason and now I'm ruined." It strikes through to her core in a way that all of her glaring into the mirror hasn't. She's ruined. The collection of Astrid-type victories scrawled all over her skin is marred by a line of absolute defeat digging into her knee.

It itches like crazy.

"You're not"

"But I am!" She can't take the blind comfort that everyone else seems to be constantly spewing at her. Hiccup can't start. "I used to be something great, but now I can't even walk anymore. I can't even straighten my leg" She frowns. "And I made you feel like this, didn't I? When I was" silently falling apart. Putting dirty secrets before Hiccup. "Like a scar made you less."

"Well, you made me feel like a scar meant you were wildly not attracted to me," he reiterates with a smile that's still slightly bitter four years later.

"This thing isn't exactly attractive," Astrid forces herself to maintain eye contact, even as her clear voice reduces to a mumble. "It's not"

"And I'm totally with you for your beautiful knees. That's the only reason," his other hand lands on her hip and she glares at him.

"Your sarcasm isn't comforting."

"I don't care about a scar. I know that you care about it, but you're probably the only one," he says earnestly. Spike barks from her place at the fence, frustrated by her girl's progress, resenting their separation when Astrid needs protection.

"It's not how it looks I don't love how it looks, but it'll fade and shrink and that's" she stops to breathe, focusing on the warm solid pressure of his hands on her sides. At least they're still the same, even when everything else is determined to be different. "It's I'm never going to be back to how I was."

"Not with that attitude," Hiccup grins, stepping back and starting up the hill almost nonchalantly. He blatantly challenges her with searing green eyes, taking an even bigger backwards step towards the house. "Let's go straighten that knee."

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Astrid moans, wrapping her arms more tightly around the back of Hiccup's neck and dragging him down towards her, panting loosely against his lips. His hand is contorted down the front of her sweatpants, pressing so sweetly against her as her nerves melt into fire under overheated skin.

It's been too long, far far too long since she's felt like this, safe and writhing under Hiccup's comforting, wiry weight. She would have kissed him as soon as he walked through the door if she knew it would end up finally like this, and she regrets that hour at arm's

length.

She groans, suddenly frustrated at the layers between them, keeping her from the warm length pressing against her good thigh through pleausurably rough denim and too thick sweatpants, fire pooling a few inches higher and driving her further insane.

She tugs at the hem of her shirt, trying to pull it over her head, but his chest is pressed too closely to hers to make that easy. His fingers glance expertly across her and she gasps, his lips sliding down and mouthing at the side of her neck. Her hand slides up from his ass and under his shirt, running her fingers over the notches of his spine and attempting to drag it over his head.

His thumb presses hard against her and rubs in a quick circle until she goes tense beneath him with a whimper, hand fisting in the stubbornly there cotton of his tee-shirt.

"Alright?" He asks, breath cool against the still moist side of her neck as his hand slides out of her pants. He braces it against the back of the couch and pulls himself off of her, carefully pushing back onto his knees. Her bad leg is elevated on the back of the couch and he readjusts it lovingly, trying to finagle his way back to his feet without disturbing her position.

Astrid sees her chance and her hand darts out, grabbing his hand still next to her ear and yanking him back down on top of her. She groans as weight falls onto her chest with a clumsy jolt, laughing and wrapping her other arm around the back of his neck.

"Better than alright," she purrs into his ear, good knee rubbing at the bulge in his jeans. He lurches upwards away from her, swinging his right foot onto the ground and trying to stand.

"Astrid!"

"What?" her elbow tightens around the back of his neck again, trying to coax him onto her again before giving up and flopping back onto the couch with a sigh. "It's been ten days and we haven't done anything."

"You're being dramatic," Hiccup sighs, pushing up the rest of the way and standing next to her. She props herself on her elbows and pouts more than she'd like to admit.

Ten days since surgery.

Ten long days of pain and itching that's worse than any pain ever threatened to be. Ten days of awkward, seated partial showers and newly minted insomnia. Ten days of almost attention.

She's probably only getting two hours of sleep a night, because seventy percent of her body is bored—and apparently reducing her to thinking like Fishlegs of all people. As if the increased sarcasm wasn't bad enough, now she's going to start relating everything to the world in terms of fractions.

Maybe she'll eventually lose everything that makes her Astrid and end up as a hectic amalgam of all the people close to her.

She just wants some sleep. She just wants Hiccup to treat her like she's normal.

"I'm not being dramatic," Astrid scowls. "We haven't done anything in _days_."

"That was nothing?" He laughs, not so subtly uncomfortable. Astrid's eyes flick to the obvious bulge in the front of his pants and she bites her lip. He tugs his shirt down and tries to cover himself, scratching nervously at the back of his neck. "Because my wrist is saying that was more than nothing."

"That wasâ€¦slightly more than nothing," Astrid admits with a shrug, still flushed. "But I'm not done yet." She glances at his crotch and he looks at her knee just as pointedly.

"I shouldn't have let it get that far," Hiccup grumbles mostly to himself, regretting the lack of self-control.

It was just the first time they'd managed to get that close since her surgery without her flinching at some point and pulling away, and she was so warm and soft and wonderfully responsive beneath him that the kissing turned into more. And this shouldn't be what she's doing right now, no matter how tempting it is to worm his way back between her thighs, brace be damned.

He can still feel the hard line where it pressed against his side, digging into his ribs like a barrier that won't let him in.

Not that he should try any harder to get in right now.

He misses the closer to constant napping, when it was easier to leave the room for fifteen minutes without question and deal with the issues left behind by her unintentional seduction.

He knows it's not typical, or even rational, but something about the constant girlfriend on his couch has been driving him absolutely insane. It's not the uncharacteristic vulnerability, because honestly that just makes Astrid meaner than normal, but he's starting to have a sneaking suspicion that it's the baggy clothes. Something about the oversized tee-shirts, mostly his shirts, and those sweats that constantly fall down and reveal that sharp line of her hipbone, peeking out welcomingly through gaps in the blankets.

That generally saggy shape hints at so much room to roam against her skin, and every time she rolls over it reminds him that she's definitely naked immediately on the other side of that thin, thin shirtâ€¦"

"You aren't _letting_ it get anywhere," Astrid insists, frowning when he takes a step backwards, soft back of his knees bumping against the coffee table.

"You should try to sleep," he urges, and it's a broken record, echoing around Astrid's seemingly eternally bored head.

"I can't sleep," she admits with a snarl. "I haven't been able to sleep in days. I'm full of energy and I have nothing to do with it," she looks him up and down, appraising. "Care to help me with

that?"

"I'll get you a Benadryl," he offers wryly and her gaze turns oddly pleading.

"Come on."

"Hey, you have no reason to complain," he frowns at her, stuffing his still drying fingers into his pocket and trying not to feel supremely awkward.

"Neither do you," Astrid arches her eyebrow at him, getting comfortable against the pillows and slowly working her shirt up over her stomach. "You're the one yanking on the emergency brake here."

"_Please_ keep your clothes on," he looks towards the kitchen biting the inside of his cheek and trying not to watch as her hands hook in the sides of her sweatpants and push the waistband down over her hips, flirting with the line of those underwear he was just inside. And it was so welcoming and warm and—and he was already going on two weeks without his girlfriend visiting before her surgery happened.

Twenty four days. He doesn't think he's been twenty four days since he lasted eighteen years.

"I'm just saying&—if you come over here," she toys with the hem of the shirt, bringing it up to her collarbone but somehow staying mostly covered by the baggy fabric that's suddenly frustrating and relieving all at once.

"You said you haven't been sleeping?" He asks, carefully looking only at her eyes, even while he imagines the rest of it.

"No," she scowls, letting go of the shirt and pressing her palms into her gritty, exhausted eyes. "I can't&—You can't know how much exercise I'm used to getting," she laughs, enumerating on her fingers. "Every morning, I run at least two miles, then I walk around all day, then I go to practice and normally run around five more miles&—" she trails off, staring at that same spot on the ceiling that ceased to be interesting a week ago.

The pockmarked plaster has looked like a dozen things carved into the shadows, but at this point she's sure that it looks like a face, generic as the man in the moon.

An unrecognizable face without true features, mocking and human, staring down at her and wondering when she's going to get up.

"You need to sleep," Hiccup repeats, distracted and far more comfortable as he focuses on something other than his second brain's raging determination.

"I can't, alright? I guess it's not _my_ injury forte," she gripes.

"I thought coma jokes weren't funny."

"It's not a joke," she insists, a smile seeping through the cracks.

"It's an insult, drowsy."

"Drowsy?" He laughs. "Not your best effort."

"Walks aren't cutting it, I need some exercise. I needâ€¦" she frowns and lets frustrated hands thump against her stomach. "And then you're over here flashing me all the time, and making it really hard to focus on sleepingâ€¦"

"Don't blame your lack of exercise on me," Hiccup cuts her off, holding his hands towards her in pseudo-surrender.

"It's your faultâ€¦" she grumbles to herself, before sighing and pulling her blanket up to her chin. "No it's not. It'sâ€¦none of this is anyone's fault. I think I'm justâ€¦used to having sex with you whenever I'm this bored."

It sounds cheap and oddly belittling, but it's more in the vein of that natural comfort that spawns from years with someone.

"Glad to know that I'm boring."

"I didn't mean it like that," Astrid snaps, rolling her eyes. "I meant it likeâ€¦I want you," she makes eye contact with him and shrugs, feigning nonchalance. "Because I am bored, and I can't really move anywhere, and honestly, what just happened was the best I've felt in a while. And wanting to feel good doesn't seem like a horrible reason to me."

That's a good point, and he sighs heavily, reaffirming his resolve.

"Astrid," Hiccup starts in that even voice that means there's no point in arguing if she doesn't want to end up feeling like a misbehaving child. "It'sâ€¦I don't want to hurt you." And she sees every flinch on her part over the last ten days reflected in his eyes and she steels her expression.

"I'm not _that_ fragile," she insists, too quiet. "And hey, maybe it's your turn to do all the work."

"I won't deny that you do most of the work," Hiccup laughs, hand brushing her bangs away from her forehead. "But you like it that way."

"Maybe I'm ready for a change," she raises her eyebrows at him, pushing the blanket back down to her waist and recommencing that horribly attractive fiddling with her too big shirt. "Come on, my leg will stay right here," she slides her hand under the waistband of her pants, patting her bad thigh above the brace. Her fingers wander back sideways and start rubbing in an even rhythm beneath the thick fabric. Hiccup swallows hard as her eyes fall shut and pearly white teeth bite down on her lower lip, unnaturally appealing. "You aren't going to hurt me, just go easyâ€¦"

"Astridâ€¦"

"I really don't want to finish without youâ€¦again," she tempts, grinning up at him and pausing that infuriating motion just long enough to pull her shirt over her head and drop it onto the floor.

Hiccup's mouth flaps wordlessly, and he blinks, telling himself that it's just his deprived libido imagining that her chest is even fuller than normal. "Seriously, I'll tell you to stop if it hurts."

The openness is stronger than any lewd temptation she could throw at him and his hands falter, hovering respectfully above her shoulders before resting against her waist as he kneels beside the couch, kissing her slowly. She laughs and pulls back, gasping throatily as his hand slides up and cups her flesh, kneading softly.

"As long as you'll actually tell meâ€|" he warns, but it sounds mostly hollow as he kisses along the line of her jaw, sitting back briefly to tug his own shirt over his head and let it join hers on the floor.

"Yeahâ€|yeahâ€|" her eyes fall shut as his lips drift so invitingly down. "Just help me take off my pants."

"Impatient?" He asks with a laugh, kneeling and carefully peeling her sweatpants away from her hips, cringing when they catch on her brace. "Astridâ€"this isâ€" "

"Just take them off the other leg," she huffs, bending that good knee and urging him to wiggle that good foot free. Her underwear follow the same winding path, halfway off, but leaving a clear path. "See, this works?"

"Thatâ€|" his eyes sweep the path from her leg, across the swoop of her waist to her long arms stretched over her head. "This is bad. This isn't going to work."

"Hiccupâ€" "

"You just had surgery!" He reaches for the blanket to cover her back up and she catches his wrist with stern fingers.

"Ten days ago," she snaps, yanking him down towards her by his arm and hooking an elbow around his neck. Her other hand slithers down his chest to unbuckle his belt, working on the button of his pants. "We'll just go slow, alright? Nice and slow and gentleâ€|" She purrs in his ear, hand slipping past his loosened zipper and into his underwear. "My knee will stay right here," she kisses his neck, rocking her hips up against him as well as she can. "I promise."

"Urgh, ok," he groans, burying his face against her shoulder and puffing warm air over her skin. "Ok, ok. I'm convinced." His pants hit the floor with a jingle that's probably far too excited and he reaches down to unbuckle his leg before climbing on the couch to kneel carefully between her knees, leather squeaking against his skin.

"Thank you," she reaches down and grabs his shaft, lining him up and gasping at the contact against her. "Seriously, thank you, Iâ€"mph," he kisses her, jaw pressing earnestly into hers as he sinks into place.

"You're babbling," he warns her, pulling out slowly and sliding back into her, nervous green eyes locked on her face. "Ok?"

"Yeah, I'm great," she nods, good heel winding its way around his back and hooking on narrow hips. Another long, slow stroke sends curls her toes into his skin as her hands wrap around the back of his neck, pulling him down closer. "Doesn't hurt at all," her voice catches in her throat and he grins.

"Alright, then."

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Both dogs greet Gerard at the door, and seeing Spike should be enough of a warning after she's spent the last week and a half glued tight to Astrid's side. It's strike two when they trot to lay on their bed near the patio door, slightly worried and curled into each other, panting and staring towards the living room.

Henry must be talking to his homework again, that always upsets the wolf. It's a habit that's only cropped up in the last couple of years, but it always makes the man feel like an absolute idiot. What is pi again? Three point somethingâ€¦

He walks into the kitchen, grabbing one of Astrid's preferred Oreos out of the jar and popping it into his mouth when she isn't here to glare daggers at him for eating what she considers to be too many. A bout of decidedly un-Astrid like laughter drifts into the kitchen from the living room and Gerard smiles, because it really is a wonderful sound.

For so many years the house was so uncomfortably silent, between his unfortunate hang-ups and expectations, and Henry's dodging quiet. Then in a few short, tumultuous weeks, Astrid whipped through, waking him up with her liveliness and giving Henry that much needed reason to open up.

A few of his colleagues have questioned his decision to let the pair live under the same roof, and thankfully it never leaked out to anyone who would care, in the same room, but some things seem inconsequential after everything they'd been through. It seemed downright cruel to take away comfort they'd just found, like snatching a new plush from a puppy. He did his job, made sure they were being safe, but at some point responsible parent falls away to nothing more than a man happy to have raised a good son, and being proud of that son for excelling at the age old adolescent sport of wooing beautiful women.

Then again, Henry does sort of seem like a one woman sort, and as much as it worries the stud he used to be, there's something about the young-love-surpassing devotion that Val really would have liked.

Not that Astrid isn't equally smitten. She might even be more obvious than Henry, but there's no one brave enough to let her know how plainly the truth rests across her features. It's probably for the best, as it would be a real shame if she tried to hide it.

Maybe Gerard's future grandkids have a shot at those athletic titlesâ€¦he shakes off the thought, because as much as he'd be proud of the rascals, he'd love them just as much if they ran around looking at pond scum through a microscope. Not to mention that he's

not exactly in a hurry to meet the munchkins. Astrid has her heart set on graduate school, and he's still excited to have another lawyer in the family.

But it would be nice to have those two out of the house eventually, provided they stay close enough to visit. Maybe he could even offer them that couch Astrid seems to like so much as a housewarming present, and get another recliner for the living room. It doesn't seem fair that he and Gobber always have to fight over the good seat, although it has gone better for Gerard since Gobber's missing foot defense stopped working at first mention.

Another near giggle permeates the wall, followed by Henry's deeper laugh before a couple of murmurs blend back into silence. It's probably time to let them know that he's home a day early, since he wouldn't want them walking into the kitchen and having a heart attack.

He flinches at the memory of coming home at two one winter morning and meeting Astrid's fist in the entryway when she was somehow sure there was a burglar to be dealt with.

Astrid is not someone he plans to surprise again.

Gerard pushes away from the counter, taking a big step before faltering and turning back just enough to grab two more cookies, chewing and swallowing them quickly before running a crisp shirt sleeve over his mouth to brush away the crumbs. Now that he has his evening's sugar fix, he can pop in and greet them. Then he'll probably head upstairs, stay out of their way and let his son finish making Astrid laugh.

He steps around the corner and through the narrow doorway, stopping barely into the living room with his hand hovering over the apparently unnecessary light switch. It takes a minute to perceive what he's seeing, and he immediately flinches backwards from a far more in depth view of his son's rear end than he'd ever intended to see. Astrid's very bare, unbraced leg is hooked over his lower back as he rocks into her, heads close together.

"My foot is stuck in your pants," Henry complains and that giggle repeats, slightly huskier than a moment before.

"Ignore it!"

Gerard spins on a heel and walks back towards the kitchen, color blanching from his face until it must rival the color of his son's day-glow ass .

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**So, right after I bring up the fact that there are no lemons because of surgery they start. That was awkward. But I hope that the realism is still good, because everything is mentioned and accounted for. Except closed doors. **

**Also, poor Jerry. No man needs to see that much of his son.
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8. Chapter 8

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Astrid pulls her tee-shirt off slowly, wincing as it brushes across the red swollen bumps on the undersides of her arms. Her back twinges when she turns to check the damage, grimacing at the obviously bruising skin.

Crutches are horrible.

That lifelong mystery of Hiccup's suddenly broad shoulders is absolutely loved, because her entire back is on fire from being overworked. Her bra might as well be made of barbed wire, the way it feels like it's biting into her ribs. Is she bleeding? She checks her arms again, and it's a no, but she might as well be, the way that it stings.

Spike jumps onto the bed beside her, obviously distressed by her girl's shallow breathing, and licks Astrid's wrist before curling up into her usual spot.

"Yeah, I'm coming," Astrid smiles fondly at the dog, scratching under her collar with stiff fingers and stopping to stroke at her ears. "Bedtime sound so good right now."

She sighs and stares at her dresser, wistful because the six feet of open carpet might as well be the Grand Canyon. That drawer, third from the top, is full of soft, clean pajamas, cotton so well worn that they might actually feel good against her chafed and angry arms. But she shakes her head, ultimately helpless. She's not getting back onto those godforsaken crutches again today, and she's not quite ballsy enough to hop over there on one foot.

Hiccup finding her sleeping shirtless is decidedly more dignified than Hiccup finding her crumpled on the floor, clutching her knee, half naked and halfway to the dresser. She's not sure she'd survive a trip that far into a role reversal.

Astrid unhooks her bra with a relieved sigh and tosses it onto the floor, wishing she'd had the foresight to turn out the lights before finding her seat. Hiccup should be by, he's been in and out of the garage all night, swearing loudly and resigning Toothless to a cycle of quiet alarm that involves staring at Astrid meaningfully every five minutes as if she could do something to fix it.

Gerard is out with Gobber anyway, it's fine.

Wiggling out of her shorts isn't exactly graceful, and Spike warbles indignantly as the bed shakes, perturbing her pre-sleep snooze and Astrid rolls her eyes at the dog before sliding under the covers. The stack of pillows meant to elevate her knee is an absolute mess and she tries to align them, frustrated when her knotted lower back makes this all harder than it needs to be.

Hiccup does a better job anyway.

Just as she's working up the nerve to call for him, dual knocks echo from her doorframe. One is Toothless's tail, wagging against the wood with a slow, casual swing as he smiles at her. Hiccup looks exhausted

above him, absentmindedly frowning at the wall above her head.

"Heyâ€|you ok?" She asks and his eyes flit down to hers and stick, blinking slowly like he's losing a train of thought.

"Yeah, I'm...long night ahead," he laments, tapping his prosthetic anxiously against her doorframe.

"What's up?"

"Just...I got the joint figured out, it just turns out I have to make the whole thing, and I don't have 24 hour access to the machine shop this semesterâ€|" he trails off, and frowns at the clock on her wall. "I was just wondering if you wanted me to shut the door, I've got to fire up the grinder and it's loud, even in here." His eye contact is so assured it would be sweet if he weren't so oblivious to her undress.

"Sure," she pulls the covers the rest of the way up to her armpits, wincing as the motion taxes aching muscles. "Do you want me to stay up with you? Because I will if you wantâ€|"

"Nah, it's fine," he waves her off, "you need sleep more than you need to hear me swear."

"You could take the office chair out there, I'd bring a book," she almost swings her legs out of bed before he cuts her off with a surprisingly stern expression.

"You need sleep more than me."

"Have you seen yourself lately?" She tries to make it a joke, but it falls flat, hanging on the stagnant air. Spike jumps down and trots over to Toothless who rumbles expressively as they walk out into the hallway, wagging tails swishing against Hiccup's jeans. "Because I think you need some sleep."

"I'll take a nap tomorrow. Or something," he assures her, running a hand through his hair and leaving a shock of it sticking straight up. "After your physical therapy."

"You don't have to take me to that, I can ask your dad or something."

"I want to," he manages a small smile, checking over his shoulder for Toothless and smiling at whatever he sees. "Do you need anything before I go back out there?"

"No-" She starts, as if ignoring the simple request would really make his life that much easier. Then again, if he helps prop her leg, she'll sleep better and there will be a better chance of her having time to make sure he has breakfast in the morning. "Really quick, can you help me with these pillows? I can't get it right." It's hard to keep her face straight realizing just how odd and helpless that really sounds, but before embarrassment can set in, Hiccup is beside her bed with that somehow charming nurturing expression tacked on over dark circles.

"Not a problemâ€|" his eyes widen, sliding down her bare back and

catching on the curve of her waist.

"What if I promise to wake you up early tomorrow?" She offers, realizing that if she can get him into bed, maybe she can get him sleeping in one. "I'll wake you up at three, and make breakfast, and you can get some rest nowâ€¦" she lets the blanket drop a few inches in front, wincing as it scrapes across the underside of her arms.

"I wish three were early enough," he clears his throat and averts his eyes, looking stubbornly at her elbow. He freezes and takes her arm into gentle fingers, examining the new bruise. "What did you do to your arm?" He swipes a careful thumb over the spot and she winces in spite of herself, yanking her elbow away and glaring at him.

"Crutches. Can you help me with the pillows?" It's too angry to be pathetic this time, and he completely ignores her exposed side as she pulls the blankets aside to give him access to the stack.

"Why are your crutches pressing there?" He asks, undeterred by nudity and the venom in her tone, taking her arm gently back into his hands. She lets him this time, miffed and staring at the far wall. "Your crutches should be up here," he brushes at the skin behind her armpit and her good foot twitches.

"That tickles."

"Sorry," he moves his hand back down to examine the red mark one more time before letting go. "Your crutches are too tall if they're hitting your arm like that, it looks like you're putting all your weight on that spot."

"The other way was making my shoulders sore," she shrugs lamely, pulling the blankets back up. The only thing worse than Hiccup staring at her when he should be listening is listening when he should be staring. "I adjusted it earlier, during my walk."

"Only a few hours and it's this banged up?" He whistles lowly and she rolls her eyes.

"It's a _bruise_."

"And you said it was hurting your shoulders before?" he asks, mostly to himself, as a big warm hand slides across her bare upper back, probing stiff muscles. She flinches and leans away from the scalding touch. What is it with him poking things that hurt right now?

"Yes, my shoulders hurt."

"And you didn't think to tell me, of course," he scoffs, holding onto her headboard and scraping his shoe off with the help of her bedframe.

"What are you doing?" She was perfectly comfortable with luring him into bed, but that clinical expression is making her nervous. The last thing she wants to do is let him mommy her and end up keeping him awake even later.

"Because it's not like I'd try and help you," he continues sarcastically, swinging one stocking foot around her back and sitting

behind her, fingers landing on her tense shoulders. She stiffens and turns to glare at him, but he cuts her off with self-assured thumbs pressing into her back.

"Oh, that'sâ€¦" She has a million protests for this, doesn't she? She should say that he looks...tense...or something. More tense. Then if he gets the massage, she can work that downwards and...he digs his knuckles into a knot near her spine and she forgets all those grand plans. "Mmm."

"Yeah, you're pretty snarled up back here," he shakes his head, scooting closer to her back to improve his angle and digging earnest thumbs into her shoulders. "Why didn't you say something?"

"It's not that bad," she insists, arching back into his touch and letting the blankets pool around her waist, too distracted to hold them up. "They're just bruises. Plus, you've been busy."

"Not too busy to help you," he shakes his head, and guilt settles in her stomach. "Wait...they?" He pauses, much to her dismay, and examines her other arm. "Astrid, this one is worse. How are they not symmetrical?" If he weren't peeved at her, it might be funny.

"I'm right-handed," she snaps, unappreciative of his criticism.

"So you put more weight on your left arm?" His hands start moving again, focusing on her left shoulder.

As much as she wants to stay upright and indignant, it feels unnaturally good and she melts into the touch, dignity preserved by glaring at her toes. And he's probably smiling too. She can just imagine how smug he is right now.

"Don't you have to go use a grinder or soemthing?" She snaps, stretching her neck to the right as his hand rubs at the tense crux of her shoulder.

"Oh, so you want me to stop?" He holds both hands away from her skin and she glares back at him. "Because i can go back to the garage."

"Come on," she slumps back towards him slightly, back already complaining about what she's about to say. "I think you need a massage more than me."

"I do?" He chuckles, digging into a spot near her shoulder blade that makes her entire spine quiver.

"You've been working too much," she whimpers when he finds that knot on the back of her neck, and one hand slides down to her lower back to hold her upright. "I'm sure you're way tenser than me."

"As nice as that sounds, I'm thinking this is a little more important." She can feel his eyes worrying at her bruises.

"They're bruises, Hiccup, they're fine."

"If your shoulders feel better, you'll use your crutches normally and they won't get any worse," he explains like it should be comforting, palms cupping her waist as his fingers dig into tense

obliques.

"It's notâ€"you don't have to be soâ€"you aren't my nurse," she spits, slouching forward and continuing in a softer tone. "You have other stuff to worry about."

"I don't mind being your nurse," he enforces the idea for what feels like the millionth time. "And if I were doing a better job, this wouldn't happen."

"Don't start blaming this on yourself," she rolls her eyes, sinking into his hands as they resume rubbing at her shoulders. "Bruises happen."

"I said I'd take better care of youâ€"

"You're fine, I can take care of myself," the looser her muscles become, the worse this feels. She has half a mind to grab his hands and put them where she wants them, but that feels too loud in the face of his quiet admissions.

"I'll adjust your crutches before I leave," he vows, and she jolts at the surprise of his warm forehead against the nape of her neck. The end of her braid tickles at her collarbone, but she doesn't dare interrupt him by reaching up to scratch it. "Get some sleep, alright?" He slides out from behind her, leaving shockingly cool air against her bare back and reaching for her crutches.

"Hiccup?"

"Yeah?"

"I hate to ask butâ€"Pillows?" Her right leg looks impossibly clunky, peeking out from under the covers.

"Right," he shakes his head and stands, lifting her knee with a careful palm under her brace and readjusting the pillows into an upright stack before setting it back down. "Ok?" He adjusts her crutches while he waits for her answer, clicking the notch back into the correct hole.

She doesn't ask how he knows which hole is right.

"It's good," she lays back against her pillow, exposed and gearing up to attempt to woo him into bed one last time. "The offer to wake you up early still stands. You could stay a while."

"Hey, I'm in nurse mode," he grins, gesturing to her bare front with an almost flippant hand. "I'm pretty sure all of _that_ is unethical."

"We can be unethical," she offers brightly, interest piqued.

"Goodnight, Astrid," his eye contact is admirable as he pulls her blankets up to her chin and drops a chaste kiss onto her forehead.

"Really unethical," she calls after him, propping herself onto her

elbows.

"I'll shut the door," he flicks off the light and disappears into the hallway with the soft click of her door's latch.

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Astrid hops into the kitchen on her crutches, leaning them against the counter and balancing on one foot while she grabs a bag of popcorn out of the cupboard and sets it in the microwave. Hiccup looks up from the dining room table, frowning at the scene and standing up.

"What's with the crutches?" He asks, walking into the kitchen and standing against the counter. She shrugs off his question, staring pointedly into the microwave and drumming her fingers on the granite.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought your therapist said you could start walking," he reminds her of the appointment that morning and she shrugs again, even more excessively casual.

"Short distances."

Hiccup frowns.

"I didn't realize you took a stroll out of state on the way to the kitchen," he snarks and she glares over her shoulder at him. His eyes catch on the delicate way that the toes of her bad foot barely brush the floor as she holds onto the counter with tightly gripped fingers.

"Hiccupâ€"

"You were fine earlier at the physical therapy office," he reminds her and she turns fully away from him, tapping the counter with the flat of her palm and resisting the urge to whirl and scream at him. It's not his fault that her knee is wrong.

"Leave me alone about this," she shakes her head and sighs .

"This is sort of my chance for revenge," he shrugs, picking up her crutches and walking back to the dining room, leaning them against his chair. When he looks back at Astrid, she's blazing, white knuckled grip on the counter shaking.

Cornered Astrid is never fun.

"Bring those back."

"I remember when you hid mine in a closet," he shrugs. "And your popcorn is burning."

She glares at him for another scalding second before turning to take the bag out of the microwave. She slams the plastic door shut too emphatically and its window rattles in the frame.

"I hid your crutches because you needed to walk on your leg so that

your doctor would know how to fix it," she explains through angry, gritted teeth, staring at the steam escaping her popcorn bag and wishing she could vent so easily.

Right. She used to be able to.

If this were _normal_ world, she could just go on a run, and then she wouldn't want to kill everything quite this much.

"You need to walk," he tells her, and his tone is so _understanding_ that she wants to punch his teeth in.

"You don't knowâ€"Ugh, seriously," she whirls around, still graceful on her good foot, to face him, eyes drowning in words that won't quite form. Horrible words. Dangerous words that finish things she's not ready to give up yet. Solid words. "Give me my crutches back."

"Oh, I don't know?" Hiccup asks rhetorically, ignoring her repeated demand and looking between her face and his mismatched feet. "I don't know what it's like to feel stranded? I don't know how it feels when you have to change the entire way that you walk?"

He's not _mad_. He's still calm and suddenly so relatable that Astrid can't infuse some sort of belabored double meaning to his words. Some sort of hidden insult that she can yell at.

"When I walked earlier," she admits slowly, mind stuck on the demoralizing memory of those ten creaky steps, "it was horrible."

"Did it hurt?" He asks, his brows furrowed as he starts to wonder if something is legitimately wrong with her leg and she was just too proud to say anything in front of the doctor. Then again, it's not like pain has ever stopped Astrid from doing anything.

"No itâ€" she clenches her teeth and sighs, shrinking as she leans back against the counter and crosses her arms. "It feels so _small_, and strange and like something is in the way. I knew it was going to be weaker butâ€"it feels like something foreign, not like my knee at all."

"Foreign," he nods. "I think I can understand that concept."

"But it's different than you," she explains, looking down at her pale toes against the tile. "It looks like me but it's some sort of imposter. I can't even see the scar through the brace, and it just looks like I haven't been careful, or I ran something too fast and tweaked it. But it's notâ€" " She gestures towards it with shaking fingers.

"I had the opposite problem," he commiserates. "My foot felt normal, and I'd reach down to scratch my toe or something and hit metal."

"I don't know which is worse," she laughs miserably.

"Honestly, I didn't really do anything with my foot...except for standing and walking," he frowns. "That sounded better in my headâ€"but I didn't really lose anything from my life when I lost my foot." The silence stretches and Astrid thinks about what she could

be losing, and if the 'could' is really necessary anymore. "Anyway, you still need to walk."

"I don't trust it," she shakes her head. "And it's not like if I start walking and I hate it, somebody is going to step in and make me a new knee that doesn't suck."

"So you're just going to be on crutches forever?" He grins at her expression, as she obviously hasn't thought this plan through to any sort of end.

"Most people with this much damage aren't weight bearing by two weeks."

"Since when are you most people?" He asks and she rolls her eyes.

"It's notâ€¦|It's not a race."

And even if it is, she's supposed to be done with those, isn't she?

"Can't hear you," he nods to himself, "definitely still getting used to the fact that you're 'most people' now."

"Hiccupâ€¦"

"Can't hear anything other than 'Astrid is average'."

"What if I fall?" she snaps, the desire to slap him mounting enough for her to test the floor with her bad foot, leaning ever so slightly against her seemingly flimsy heel. It feels eons away from the rest of her, like there's a stretched out slinky hanging slack between her hip and shin. "What if it doesn't work right?"

"Astrid." At least he's not mocking her anymore. "You know what's going to happen when you walk?"

"I'm going to punch you for calling me average."

"After that," he flinches prematurely and over-dramatically before continuing. "It's going to be the same thing that happened to me. Your circulation is going to increase, and the swelling will go down, and you'll heal faster."

"I'm still going to punch you," she mumbles, taking a cautious step forward onto her bad foot and inching her good foot forward with a mincing little shuffle.

"Oh, I figured," he shrugs and she glares at him, shuffling forward a little further. Her third step is easier, the blood pounding through her leg unreasonably fast and loud.

"Hard," she threatens with a cautious smile, taking a slightly more confident fourth step. And fifth step. "Average my ass," she reiterates, fully across the kitchen and grabbing his extended forearms for support. As soon as she's stable, her fist connects with his deltoid in that age old sweet spot. He winces and she rolls her eyes. "You called me average."

"Thank you for not killing me," he recites like it's something an arrogant teacher forced him to memorize.

"Seriously though," she drops her voice, leaning on him a little harder. "Thanks, Hiccup." And the following laugh is barely self-deprecating. "I'd kiss you right now, but tip toes are a little beyond me at the moment."

"I can be shorter," he demonstrates, letting his stocking foot slide out a few inches on the tile, bringing him closer to her level. He grins, goofily hopeful gap showing between chapped lips.

She kisses his grin chastely, moving to pull away before his hand winds into her hair, fingers hot against the nape of her neck. His tongue swipes questioningly across the seam of her lips and she lets him in, hand sliding up his shoulders and gripping at his shirt.

Things are no longer as reasonable. Astrid nips at Hiccup's lower lip and he groans, grabbing her waist and attempting to walk her backwards towards the nearest counter. She winces and shoves him off reflexively, staring at her leg with shocked, teary eyes, before laughing miserably.

"Sorry," he apologizes, hands back on her in support as she wipes an errant tear from her cheek. She leans heavily to the left, bad toes barely touching the ground.

"It's ok," she laughs again, sniffing and getting the pain under control. "I was into it tooâ€|but that hurt." She hops a bit on her left foot, willing the pain to dissipate faster.

"I'll be more careful," he promises apologetically, taking more of her weight into his strained grip. He doesn't think that she notices, but even if she does, she doesn't say anything about it. "I'm not used to you beingâ€"

"Don't say it," she sighs, shifting closer and bracing her hands against his shoulders. "I know. I'mâ€|_delicate_ right now." The admission releases some valve in her chest, and she's suddenly disgustingly exhausted from standing this long.

"How about you go sit down, and I'll bring you your popcorn and medicine," he offers gently, and she can see the appeal of knights in shining armor.

"Thank you, you're my hero," she smiles at him, eyes still embarrassingly drippy as she detaches from him and steps away, gimping with genuine pride towards the couch.

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"Bullshit!" Astrid crows indignantly at the TV, stomping with her good foot and clutching the remote so tightly she's surprised it doesn't crack.

She should have known it was going to be a bad thing when she saw college track on some second rate sports channel. She never should have stopped to check if she cared about this meet. She should have gone downstairs and worked out her left leg, or arms, or

something.

Some girl from Montana just won the five thousand in 15:27, and Astrid is sitting here knowing full well that she ran a 15:19 last week at practice. Well, not last week, she scowls, the last week she was practicing.

She can see her team in the background, all tan strong legs and black and yellow uniforms. At least none of them are cheering for that scummy five thousand. They know she would have won that.

No problem.

It would have been no problem.

"Hofferson, still out because of a knee injury," the announcer drawls, catching her attention in that way only possible upon heaving a familiar name. "She would have been the favorite, given her second place in the event at Worlds last year." And before she can say anything, or even let it sink in, there's that infernal picture of her perfect start.

Legs strong and loose, arms pumping, chin up and facing forward. It's textbook. Her knee is taped in the relic, quad tugging on the top of the wrap as she surges off of the starting line. It's not a picture of the girl who minced out of her bedroom this morning, once confident leg now rickety and depressing.

"â€|coach has reserved comment, but it's unlikely we'll be seeing her back this season. And it is her senior NCAA season." The commenter finishes, hollow sadness almost insulting.

"Oh, so I can see you're so sorry," Astrid rolls her eyes, tapping the remote on the arm of the couch, "your job is just so boring now that I'm not there, is that it? I bet." It feels so good to yell at something, and she lets herself forget the obvious futility. "Now you don't haveâ€" "

"Who are you talking to?" Hiccup asks, peering into the room, still wearing into his jacket.

"I thought you were at class."

"Just got home," he answers slowly at her hostile tone that's some sort of high school echo in his brain. "So again, who are you talking to?"

"Spike," she answers curtly and they both glance towards the two obviously sacked out dogs in the corner.

"She's pretty riveted," Hiccup deadpans and Astrid sighs, patting the couch next to her with a heavy hand.

"Fine. I was talking to the TV." Hiccup crosses the room and sits next to her, frowning when a gun goes off and a heat of six guys charges into a thousand meter race. "It didn't answer," she offers with a feeble smile, like a kid being caught with something expensive and fragile.

"Maybe we should watch something else," he looks around for the

remote, which is conveniently clenched in her white knuckled fist.

"Come on, the 10k is next. I love watching the 10k." She clears her throat and puts on an utterly unconvincing smile, dropping the act immediately at Hiccup's unflinching doubt.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" He offers. "You can pick." She glares at him, irritated by the hopeful disregard of her clearly stated preference. "Seriously anything, I'll even watch something where everything diesâ€" she rolls her eyes and turns back to the TV, eyes tracing the track in smooth, worried ovals. "Cujo, I'll watch Cujo."

"You would rather watch Cujo, where an evil, rabid dog kills people," she reminds him, carefully tracking his expression, "than a thirty minute 10k with me."

"Come onâ€" I likeâ€" he hesitates under her critical eye. "I like making you happy," his voice is awkwardly flat behind the simple truth and he grins a little too widely to cover it up.

Astrid scoffs, utterly nonplussed.

"Why would you think I'd like Cujo?" She snaps and he shrugs, answer coming through too loudly in the lazy motion. "Because there's gore? Honestly Hiccup, I don't do animals and gore. It's disgusting." She shudders emphatically, eyes locked on the TV. The gun goes off for that long race and one of her teammates claims second right off of the start.

"Oh, so killing people is fine, but killing animals freaks you out?" He puts on a girly voice and flicks imaginary bangs out of his eyes before continuing. "Throw another idealistic, lost teenager on the chainsaw, but not the kittyâ€"Ow!" He flinches from that indomitably rock hard fist against his bicep.

"Not your best impression," but she is smiling as she shakes her head, turning back to the TV. "That's my friend, Andi, in second," she points at the screen and the mostly black dot rounding an end of the track. If Andi keeps up that pace, she'll qualify for Regionals. It's wonderful to have someone to root for. "She's way more sane than me, I don't think I could go 25 laps without stopping to kill someone."

"25 laps?" Hiccup whistles, unzipping his jacket and pulling it off before resting an unrealistically comforting arm over her shoulders. "How many miles is that?"

"About 6.2," her head falls against the side of his chest, shifting to get comfortable. "They never made me do this race, I was better at the 5k and the 3k." The past tense feels horribly significant, like admitting something is lost rather than temporarily misplaced.

"Have those races happened yet?" He asks, gleaning the answer from her heavy slouch, clear before she even opens her mouth.

"I didn't see the 3kâ€"but I would have won the 5," it doesn't sound like taunting, not really. It feels like she's discussing someone who's gone, but remembered fondly, the urn staring down from the

mantle with glossy ceramic glaze. Like defending Henry Haddock's proper name when no one was sure if he would need it again. Her talent would have won the 5kâ€|that once great Hofferson podiatric duo would have dominated.

"You don't know that, Astrid," he comforts blindly, unsure whether it's worse to be certain about the race or to content herself with the mystery.

"But I do, the girl who wonâ€|" she pauses, because it's not about that other runner, not really. She doesn't hate the girl like she wants to, and the glowing misery in her stomach feels like something closer to envy.

She's jealous.

Horrifically jealous.

"What about her? Is she your arch-nemesis or something?" He asks and Astrid rolls her eyes.

"I don't have an arch-nemesis, you really need to stop thinking about sports like comic books."

"It's the only way I understand your mythos."

"You're ridiculous," Astrid sighs, tucking herself a little closer to that warm side. "And it's nothing about the girl who won. The winning time was 15:27, and I ran a 15:19 lastâ€|a couple weeks ago. Right beforeâ€|yeah."

"And you're mad?" Hiccup guesses at her unusually morose tone, flatter than that vibrant anger that always manages to light up the house.

"I'm _jealous_, alright?" She snaps, splitting the word like an insult. "I'm jealous that all of these people have normal knees, and that nothing stabbed them in the back before they could do what they worked so hard for. I _deserve_ to be there, I know I do, but I don't get to be, and I'm jealous." She seethes, face bare of any sort of veneer. "They even mentioned that I would have won if I weren't out for this stupidâ€|thing."

Her knee. Her idiotic, lazy knee.

"I bet they're jealous of you," he starts carefully and she stiffens against him. "I bet they're all miserable with running _twenty-five_ laps, and you're here on the couch."

"Just because running that far is miserable doesn't mean they'd rather be on a couch somewhere," she corrects wistfully, and he changes direction.

"They're all out there running, and the announcer is still talking about you. You aren't even there, and you're still winning air-time."

"I don't want air-time. I want to race," she insists, fully aware of how whiny she sounds and too deeply perturbed to really care. "I want to run."

"Astrid" the commentator says something about the result of the 5k and the camera goes to an off field podium, the girl from Montana beaming in her too big warm up jacket.

"She has two working knees, she got her heart rate up today and no one has to help her into the shower. Why shouldn't I be jealous?"

Hiccup thinks for a moment, and some smart retort isn't worth winning this argument. It's not an argument, not really. He's never been on this end of the stick when it comes to self-deprecation, and he's utterly sure that punching her in the arm and kissing her until she forgets what she's upset about isn't the right approach.

What if she's right? What if she is less of an athlete than everyone on TV right now?

It doesn't matter to him. She's still tougher and stronger and more inspiring than anyone he's ever met.

Saying that wouldn't help anything. All that stifled competitive energy is radiating out of her pores like poison, shoving her deeper into that pit of uselessness.

This is Astrid. She needs to win something, hands down. She needs to feel that well-deserved victory.

"Your butt is way better than hers," Hiccup answers seriously and Astrid jerks upright, staring him in the face and trying to tell if he actually just said anything, or if she's finally insane.

"My what?"

"Your butt is way better than hers. Than any of theirs."

"My butt is better?" She thwacks him on the arm with an open hand. "That's what you've got? I'm upset over here," she minimizes, "and it's all ok because I have a nice butt."

"You do," he shrugs, grinning too cheekily. "It's got a better curve," he gestures with an open hand and she blushes in spite of her best intentions. "I like the size, and it looks way better in those shorts" He elaborates while she glares at him.

"Hiccup!"

"Your butt is fantastic," he insists and she rolls her eyes, blush creeping over her eyebrows.

"You're an idiot," and her bemused hand finds his on the couch between them.

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**So no interrupted lemons this time

**Astrid's walking again, and we have three different kinds of support going on here, and I'd absolutely love to know what you guys

think about this! Let's keep this conversation going. Thank you!
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9. Chapter 9

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Astrid wakes up, uncomfortable and too cold, trying to roll over and flinching as her eyes spring wide open. No rolling. No sleeping on her stomach, or side, or with Hiccup. She figures she'd be used to it by now, but all she can think about is how miserably uncomfortable she is on her back with that knee perennially elevated. It doesn't help if she puts her other foot next to it, more pillows makes her last good foot lose circulation and less lets her bad foot swell.

It's a miserable way to start any day of the week, let alone Saturday.

Her leg throbs in time with her heartbeat, and it's obvious that she woke up from the pain. Again.

Her bottle of halved pain pills and glass of water is where she left it, and she drags herself onto her elbows with a sigh, popping a pill into her mouth and swallowing it with a bitter swig of water. She hates pills. She hates this.

She takes a quiet minute to compose herself before swinging her feet over the side of the bed and shivering as her good toes touch the ground, gripping at the wood floor. Crutches or no crutches?

She's going downstairs, she can do that without crutches.

Can't she?

She scoffs at the internal question, grimacing and pushing to her feet, leaning heavily on a hand still anchored to her bedframe and awkwardly hopping to plant her good foot more comfortably against the edge of the rug. Her knee is stiff, and it hurts, like it's been hurting for years. It's an absolute pro with pain. Right now, she can't even really remember what it was like to jump out of bed, kneel down to tug on her shoes and sprint out the door, running late somewhere.

God, what she wouldn't do to kneel. Or put on her own shoes that aren't flip-flops.

Two shuffling steps towards the door and she lets go of the bedframe, smiling slightly at her comparative stability and plowing forward with a straight-legged hobble, like a puppet in the hands of an amateur. She's halfway to the door when Spike trots in, obviously just waking up with Hiccup across the hall. Spike was there last night, when she was falling asleep, but it seems she gave up at some point, sick of Astrid's tossing and turning.

She can't even sleep with her own goddamned dog. She can't go four hours without having to wake up and swallow a huge pain pill.

At least Hiccup is home today, at least she'll have someone to talk

to, and won't spend another day in a half-dark room, shooing the dogs' overly-physical comfort and reading.

"Yeah, I love you girl, but you aren't exactly chatty," Astrid barely bends enough to pat the dog's boxy head, grinning at that wide canine smile. Spike is finally starting to get a sparse sprinkle of snow white hairs across her blue-grey muzzle, but at nine years old, that's not exactly shocking. "Both of us are looking a little rough, huh girl?" She smooths a thumb over that greying muzzle and smiles at the wet pink tongue that laps over her hand. "Yeah? Well, thanks for the boost sweetie, let's go downstairsâ€¦if I can make it."

Spike steps away, picking up a lonely, angrily thrown running shoe from the corner and dropping it on Astrid's feet.

"Ohâ€¦" She deflates, attempting to bend down and pick up the shoe, frustrated when she can't even touch her own toes without tugging at her newly stiff hamstrings. "I can'tâ€¦We can'tâ€¦" It feels like someone filled her lungs with wet sand, like she's running too far or too fast as the reality of this situation hits her.

Spike wants to go for a run. For a dog, this is pretty damn clear communication. The shoe is mocking her, mud crusted treads grinning up at her from the floor, reeking of capability and adventure.

She and Spike love to run up to Toothless's old shed and explore the deer trails in that part of the woods, laughing and dodging sly tree roots, stopping to wrestle in a field every now and then. Toothless would join most mornings, darting in and out of the trees like a ghost while Spike scurried after squirrels. It's the worst part about running at school, being away from all those wooded paths, forced onto _icy_ streets.

Spike nudges the shoe towards her foot.

Her eyes itch and she steps backwards carefully onto her good foot, bad toes hovering nervously above the floor. It's horrible, just how normal that singular leg feels, cramped and antsy from too little activity. Her knee throbs irritably at its slight bend and she exhales, putting it on the floor and immediately feeling crippled.

"No, we can't go girlâ€¦I can't go with youâ€¦" Spike picks up the shoe by its laces and takes another step forward, face expectant like Astrid isn't really as smart as she used to be. "No. No no no, hun. Iâ€¦Iâ€¦stop!" She raises her voice as everything seems impossibly worse. Spike is as miserable as she is. She's making Spike _deprived_ and upset, just like that good knee still full of spring and eager to _go_.

Spike can't go either. She got this dog and gave her this new happy life, and now it's all being taken away by some stupid, stupid injury that she can't control. She can't evenâ€¦

"Spike, go downstairs, alright?" Astrid nearly begs, clumsily hopping backwards and sitting on the edge of her bed. The dog drops the shoe and jumps up beside her girl, trying to lick the side of her neck and whimpering apologetically. Her energetic tail sideswipes the glass of water on the bed-side table and it falls to the carpet with a heavy

thump, water bleeding underneath Astrid's foot. "Go downstairs, come on, downstairs!" Astrid urges too loudly, trying to hold back that licking head and lapping guilt.

"Astrid?" Hiccup peeks his head around the doorway, pencil tucked behind his ear. He crosses the room in two quick steps and pulls Spike back with cautious hands, taking her place and sitting down beside his obviously distraught girlfriend. "What's up? What's wrong?"

"Iâ€¦" she points to the shoe in the middle of the floor, still mocking her with those ruggedly muddy treads. "Spike brought me my shoe."

The sentence sounds horribly innocuous, and it's embarrassing how upset she is.

"Oh," Hiccup mutters, laying his arm across her shoulders and pulling her against his side. "Maybe Spike thinks she's getting fat ."

The dog pauses in worrying over her owner to glare at Hiccup.

"No, she wants me to take her on a run," Astrid mumbles, voice catching in that weak way that never would have slipped past her two capable feet. "She wantsâ€¦sheâ€¦" Hiccup cups her chin with a careful hand, wiping a tear she hadn't realized leaking out off of her cheek with an absurdly gentle thumb. She wants to yell at him that he doesn't need to be so finicky with her, but at the same time she can't bring herself to resent his finesse like she should. "I can't run with her."

"You just started walking, Astrid."

"Butâ€¦we run every time I'm home. She knows that andâ€¦"andâ€¦" A sob slips out and Hiccup holds her closer, thumb stroking at her cheek. She wants to bite the hand forcing her to face him. "She's going to start hating me," she blurts before she really thinks about it, instantly regretting the words as another wave of tears spill down her face.

"She could never hate you," Hiccup assures her, tugging her face against his shirt. "She just doesn't understand why you're not quite you right now."

"Are you saying I'm different?" She sobs, immediately barking a laugh at the tone that sounds nothing like her usual voice. Hiccup's hand rubs her back and she wipes the rest of her tears on his shirt before sitting up and exhaling in a measured, controlled way that feels more like her than any other part of this situation. "Point taken."

"I didn't say anything," he defends mildly, wiping her face with gentle, callused fingers. "And I'll take Spike on a walk right now, ok? We'll go with Toothless, it'll be fun." Astrid shakes her head at the offer, that panicky feeling tightening again on her chest.

"She doesn't want a walk, she needs a run. She's used to more activity than just walking, and I don't want her to gain weight andâ€¦" An undignified hic-cough cuts off the stream of words and she sighs miserably.

Hiccup purses his lips and nods to himself, regretting what he's about to offer before the words even taste the open air.

"I'll take her."

"I just said she wants a _run_â€" "

"I said I'll take her on a run," Hiccup's tone is anything but excited, lack-luster words of a middle-schooler informed that it's mile day in gym class. Astrid doesn't want to laugh, but her restraint appears to be impaired on all fronts. She snorts and turns her face away, trying to hide the expression even as her crying dissolves to bizarre giggling. Ugh. Giggling. "That really inspires my confidenceâ€"|"

"Wait," she turns to him, smiling eyes watery. "You're serious?"

"Good to know that you think me running anywhere is a joke."

"You're actually serious about this?" She repeats, suddenly nervous. "You'd actually do that for me?" And it's overwhelmingly tender beneath all the anxious, jealous worry.

He can run and she can't. He hates to run but he will. Is it still cold enough to frost? How is the footing?

"If Spike needs to go on a runâ€"|" he shrugs, embarrassed, and she hugs him, arms clamping around his lower back. "Oh, umâ€"|"hi," his chest is damp with her tears against the side of her cheek as she squeezes him tighter, relishing in the fact that she can still do something right. "Need to breathe though," he wheezes and she sits back up, hands lingering at his sides.

"It's not slippery outside, is it?" She checks and he shakes his head.

"Sixty and sunny."

"I'd stay by the road, too," she cautions, left out and envious in equal proportions to how touched she is. "Harder to trip."

"I'm sure I can handle it, Astrid," he reminds her wryly, standing and patting his hip to call Spike's attention. She looks at him curiously before flicking her eyes back to Astrid and panting, tongue lolling nervously out of her mouth.

"You guys will be fine." He turns with a smile and walks towards the door, Spike trotting obediently behind him, head still turned to stare at Astrid worriedly. "Remember your inhaler."

"Ok, _mom_."

"Thank you."

It's thirty five minutes later when a red faced Hiccup trudges back through the front door, a spry but measurably deflated pair of dogs bounding inside past him. Astrid looks up from her roost on the couch and raises her eyebrows at Hiccup's huffing red face. He stumbles over and flops onto the couch next to her, jouncing her knee almost

painfully before grabbing her glass of water and chugging it. His head thunks back against the cushions like an abandoned bowling ball.

"You _miss_ that? You do that for fun?" He groans, pushing his sweat soaked bangs off of his face and stretching his arms over his head.

"How far did you go?" She ignores his question with an eye-roll, turning back to the TV and trying not to stare at the sweat-slicked line of his tricep.

Hiccup has never really been the type to work out in any sort of flashy way, and even his physical therapy was mostly barbells and stretching. Not that she minded seeing him lift things or anything, that was nice in its own way, watching the potential grow under the skin. But his muscles ceased to be fascinating without drawbacks as soon as he started physically moving her.

She remembers being slightly grossed out when Scott took off his football helmet after a game and kissed her, all sweat and prickly new moustache she couldn't convince him to shave.

This couldn't be more different.

For one, Hiccup looks older with those boyish floppy bangs away from his face, long forehead accentuating all of that sharp jaw. It's also impossible to miss the way his tee-shirt is damp around the neck and clinging to those defined collarbones and the skinny, but rippled surface of his chest, all sinuous muscles visible through thin cotton.

Something within her, steeped in an odd combination of grateful love and pure pheromones, really wants to lick the side of his freckled, salty neck.

"Three miles? Maybe a bit more?" He heaves, hand on his stomach as he tries to catch his breath. "I don't know, I went out towards where the shelter used to be," he glances sideways at her dreamy expression and sighs. "And you aren't listening to me at all, because you're busy watching how out of shape I am."

"Hmm?" She snaps out of it, blinking a couple of times and glancing down at that chest before locking eye contact. "Three miles to where?"

"I ran for three miles" he repeats, narrowing his eyes at her. She nods in understanding, cheeks too flushed as her eyes flick back down across him before sheepishly returning to his face. "Oh," he grins, sitting up and stretching his arms behind his head.

"Oh what?" She snips, looking pointedly back to the TV as his shirt rides up and exposes an inch of pale stomach. "Oh means nothing."

"Oh, you were checking me out," he rephrases, smiling cheekily and stretching a long, damp arm around her shoulders. She shrugs it off and leans forward, reaching for her water as a distraction and frowning when it's empty.

There's nothing implicitly embarrassing about being caught out, but something about her bedraggled ponytail and perpetually stiff leg doesn't exactly make her confident. That and the last thing she needs is to let Hiccup know that post-run sweat turns her on. She can see about a million ways that could go wrong and he frankly doesn't need anything else going for him in that department.

"I was wondering when you're going to go shower," she lies, and some primal corner of her mind wonders again just what all that sweat tastes like.

Sure, she's gotten a hint of it in plenty of second rounds over the last five years, but there's something uniquely enticing and almost uncomfortably manly about sweat generated from exercise. And not just exercise, exercise for her.

She knows she can't be alone in the general fascination, some of their most memorable times quickly followed her coming home from a run, but it's definitely something she's never thought of before. She's been missing out.

"I don't know," he sits up straight, narrowing his eyes at her not quite convincing bluff. "I thought I might cool down first."

"Then go open a window," she suggests with a hyper-casual shrug.

He stares her in the face and pulls that damp shirt over his head, leaning back against the couch with all of the confidence that years together has provided. She gulps and turns away, adjusting her bad foot against the edge of the coffee table and nodding slowly.

"Cooler now?" She asks tersely and he reaches out and grabs her hand, resting it against his still pounding heart, and all of that slick, smooth, gleaming skin.

"What do you think?" And he's so unbelievably cheeky and firm, and completely whimsically entrancing.

"I think that you're being a tease, and if you want something, you're going to have to come and get it," she gestures to her elevated leg with her free hand, running her other fingers down his chest through the sparse chestnut hair and tickling at his side.

"Ohâ€|right," he shakes his head.

"Yeah, sort of sedentary," she reminds him with a grin, freely looking down his chest. "But sedentary and ogling."

"Ogling, huh?" He puffs out his chest, making him look a little bit constipated and no more muscular. "Maybe I should just stay over here so you can lookâ€" "

"Come kiss me already," Astrid rolls her eyes and Hiccup grins, turning towards her and pressing his lips to hers, hand resting against her face. She gropes freely at his muscular back, tracing those long lean cords and letting her fingers slide under the waistband of his pants, grabbing at him and yanking him over her.

Things get heated rather quickly, tongues tangling between urgent lips. Hiccup's hand pushes her shirt halfway off, groping at her as she struggles with his pants, trying to shove them down. She gets frustrated with her prone position and grabs the back of his neck, reflexively pushing with her feet to flip them.

It'd be nice to lay on his chest, kiss her way down and tease him a bit. That sounds like an absolutely flawless game plan until her knee cries out with electric pain.

Her teeth clamp down on his lower lip and he squeaks, fingernails digging into her shoulders. It takes a moment of singing, crying pain for her to relax and plop back onto the couch, breathing hard for reasons completely separate from making out as her toes throb in and out of a prickly realm.

"Are you ok?" He asks, probing his lip with his tongue and making sure that he's not bleeding.

"Got excitedâ€¦forgot knee," she grits out, and his apologetic hand lands against her shoulder, rubbing soothingly.

"Maybe you just need to take a break from being on top," he rolls his eyes and laughs, and she backhands him weakly, knuckles thunking against his bare chest.

"You're on top plenty," she scoffs, and he laughs. "You were on top last time."

"I try to act manly one timeâ€¦"

"Manly?"

"I went and worked out, and I came back and charmed you, and you couldn't let me be on top for two minutesâ€¦"

"As much as I want to listen to your whiningâ€¦"

"Hey," Hiccup protests.

"Will you go get me some aspirin?" She tries to sound assertive, but mostly feels pathetic as she has to give into the angered throbbing. "I can't have another Vicodin yet."

"It really hurts that much?" And he's suddenly serious, leaning over and looking carefully at her bruised knee through the window of her brace. It looks the same, but that doesn't really mean much.

"Oh, so now you're going to complain about me asking for pills?" She snaps, obviously miserable.

"No, I'll be right back." And he regretfully pulls his stupid shirt back on, kissing the top of her head before making his way to the medicine cabinet.

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Astrid focuses on the bar above her head, readjusting her grip and carefully lifting it, lowering it down to touch her chest with a measured exhale. At least parts of her are starting to feel normal on

this new regimen.

Three sets of thirty, forty five pounds.

The doctor says it'll help maintain her cardio, but it doesn't seem like much at all. The idiotically stubborn part of her wants to do more, but for once it is being miraculously overpowered by the slim rational bit that's a little fixated on her lack of spotter. The last thing she needs right now is a broken rib.

She asked Hiccup to spot her with more weight last night, but it was something of a disaster. At first, he was sure that spotting meant that she didn't end up lifting any of the weight at all, then he was so thrilled with himself that he could actually lift the barbell that he spent the next ten minutes curling with the most awkward form she's ever seen, practically trying to throw out an elbow.

He should stick to workouts focused on dog wrangling, because whatever he's doing is working, and honestly she wants to keep him out of the spare bedroom Gerard uses as a gym. She might as well have let a tornado inside.

Well, a very handsome and even more clever tornado that succinctly mounted weight racks that have been grounded under his father's far off promise for years. And she wasn't exactly complaining about the view up the front of his shirt during his brief and fizzled career as her spotter.

Keeping Hiccup away from the free weights almost seems like a convention rather than an issue subject to reason. It's like keeping chocolate away from appetizers. There's not a hard and fast rule of any kind, and no real reason for the separation apart from cultural strangeness, but she's probably not going to be ordering a cocoa starter any time soon.

Then again, some magical things have happened when chocolate took savory food into it's capable hands and molded them into something new. Chocolate wontons and chocolate covered pretzels and

She wonders if chocolate nachos could ever truly live up to their name. Or chocolate quesadillas.

Maybe they'd involve pie crust, and cinnamon sugar. And some sort of sweet, fruity dipping sauce with a side of crunchy, sticky peanut brittle

She racks the bar with a final grunt and wipes a hand across her damp forehead, licking suddenly parched lips.

Dessert quesadillas would be an absolute winner.

She's never really had sugar cravings like this prior to the past few weeks. It's always been more of a salt requirement that kept her craving chips and hot wings, no matter how much grilled chicken she managed to choke down. Maybe it has something to do with healing, or trying to get a caloric handle on her admittedly violent mood swings, but the last two weeks have driven her sweet tooth up a wall.

And again, Hiccup has shown wisdom beyond his experience, reading her plain faced boredom like a children's book and showing up with candy

bars and bags of almost chocolate chip cookies that crumble and melt against her tongue, teasing of some mythical main course. Last night, it was a dozen, moist chocolate cupcakes, swimming in frosting and sporting pastel pressed sugar sprinkles.

The little hard disks always have the best crunch, condensing to chewy sweet nuggets that stick in her molars and linger.

She wipes a hand over her face and shakes her head, sitting up a little too quickly. One foot grips the short carpet with capable toes while the other dangles at an awkward angle, somehow pale and pitiable even below her new, slightly less bulky brace.

At least walking is getting easier.

It takes a moment of lip biting focus, but she manages to straighten her leg and plant a flat foot on the floor as she stands. It's something worth smiling about, even as the knee shrinks back into a slight bend like an overtaxed rubber band.

Progress.

If she keeps on a schedule, they're starting to say magical things like jogging at seven weeks. It's too late for her season to be something, but it's not too late for her.

If she's completely honest with herself, which still doesn't number among her list of top talents, being a stereotypical couch potato was abnormally terrifying. Sure, she's ahead in all of her classes, despite strictly e-mail communication with professors, but it's no kind of life staring at a TV and writing papers. Being sedentary gives her too much time to think and not enough to think about, leaving her yearning for Hiccup to come home, or for Spike to spontaneously start speaking.

She can only throw a tennis ball in silence so many times before something crucial threatens to snap in her brain. Then her brain and knee can really relate, slow crooked twins in a sea of fully functioning parts.

She needs to get out more.

She checks her watch and sighs happily, because it's only fifty seven minutes until Ruff is going to be here, requiring her assistance on some mysterious errand that probably has no purpose aside from preserving her sanity without questioning it. She couldn't be more thankful for the effort.

Half an hour of awkward hopping later, Astrid is out of the shower, standing on one leg in her underwear and digging through a lower dresser drawer for a pair of jeans. She leans on the bed and twists to sit, frowning and adjusting the slipping elastic of her bra that must be wearing out, before carefully dragging the denim up her legs. They get stuck on what must be her bed about halfway up her thigh and she stands, pulling a little more sharply with her thumbs hooked through her belt loops.

Maybe she's still damp. That could be the problem here, right? She gives another sharp tug.

The waistband slides over her hips and she frowns, wiggling slightly and trying to adjust the suddenly exceptionally present seams along the sides of her thighs. Did these go through an extra hot dryer?

Not that she remembers.

She frowns at Spike and reaches down to tug at the still unfastened button, trying to ford the gap and worrying at the odd angle of her open zipper.

"I've had these forever," she mumbles, mostly to herself, but still staring at Spike's wide eyes. Toothless peeks a long head around the corner and she feels oddly exposed under his brilliant amber gaze. He grumbles to Spike who smiles as apologetically as a dog can before heaving to her feet and following the wolf out of the room. A door opens downstairs and Hiccup greets Toothless with his consummate excitement, and from the thump that follows, she guesses that the dogs must have knocked him down to properly get at his face.

Astrid stares down at her mysteriously tight pants again, pulling a tee-shirt on and resolutely walking across the hallway to Hiccup's bathroom, and pulling the now never-used scale off of its old shelf.

She knows that she's probably put on a pound or two, what with the sitting around, but she's been hurt, and healing takes energy. How much energy? Plus, she knows she was a little heavy before the fall, her coach wanted her to put on five pounds before league, so that she wouldn't be low on reserves by nationals this year. So she was...something like 105? It can't be that bad.

Probably 106? Maybe 107?

That's no so bad. That's a week of spinach and chicken, and she'll be back down to off season 102, right?

Something ominous and heavy settles in her stomach as she steps onto the scale and looks down, trying to wrap her brain around the number. It's not 107. It's not even 108.

115?

What?

Can she even weigh 115? She steps off of the scale and peels the too tight jeans away from her legs, letting them pile on the floor and stepping back onto the scale with baited breath.

114.

And her pants don't fit.

She steps away from the obviously crazy scale and puts it back on the shelf, shaking her head and scooping her traitorous pants off of the floor, heading back into her bedroom. She intersects Hiccup in the hallway where he's baiting Spike with a mangy ancient tennis ball, waving it back and forth above her head. His eyes catch hers and glance down to her bare legs, fumbling the ball neatly into Spike's waiting mouth as his cheeks flush and he drags his eyes back to her

face.

"Hey Hiccup," she greets, failing in hiding her mood as she crosses her arms sheepishly. He frowns and steps towards her looking curiously at the pants slung over her arm and obviously trying to match her expression to its cause.

"Hey," he looks her over again, eyes catching and lingering a little too long on her bare skin before landing back on her face. "What's up?"

"Getting ready to go out with Ruff," she shrugs, folding forward a little under his warm gaze that doesn't feel quite as pleasant as normal. "She has to come down here to run some errandsâ€¦"

"Are you ok?" He asks again, frowning at her odd, shrunken posture. Even in her lowest moments, he doesn't think he's seen her hide quite so obviously.

"I'm good," she lies, tapping her bad foot slowly on the carpet and feeling oddly exposed on her still unbraced knee. This is probably the longest she's been on her feet without the extra support, but it doesn't currently feel like a victory.

At least if she'd weighed herself with the brace she could subtract half a pound. Or a full pound.

She needs something that will let her subtract a pound.

"Is there anything you want to talk about?" He tests the water and she shrugs near violently, looking around the hallway and shuffling back towards her bedroom. She's still leaning heavily to the right, but doesn't look as crooked as she did the last time she crossed a room without her brace, and he crosses out injury as a reason for her obvious upset.

"Not reallyâ€¦" she feigns, turning and walking towards her bed, slow and as even as she can manage. Hiccup's eyes drift down the line of her spine, barely visible through her shirt before pausing and widening on her underwear clad rear. That's...is that?

His hands itch irritably and he wipes them on his thighs, swallowing and clearing in his throat.

That's definitely...different.

"A-are you sure?" He asks, hurrying forward a little too quickly to lean on the doorframe. She raises an eyebrow at the stutter and cocks her head, whirling on healthy toes to perch on the edge of the bed.

"Are you ok?" She checks, sounding a little more normal with joking concern dripping from the words like audible punctuation. He shrugs, holding his eyes to her face when they're dying to be anywhere else. Everywhere else.

Not that her face isn't appealing. He could look at those blue eyes all day and not get bored. Or her lips, so inviting and soft and pinkâ€¦

"Hmm?"

"I asked if you were ok," she repeats, a little less than friendly this time before standing and holding her jeans in front of her again, frowning quizzically at the denim. Her eyes pause on the suddenly foreign rise of her chest and she exhales pointedly, trying to discern if she's holding her breath and that's why she can't see nearly as much of her feet.

Nothing changes.

"I'm fine," Hiccup assures her, shaking his head and trying to stop thinking about the way the waistband of her underwear is barely cutting into the soft flesh of her hips. It looks softer than normal, and he wonders if that has something to do with the rear that he somehow didn't notice until now.

Has it always been that way? Or did something really change? He hasn't seen her naked since...last week, but that was mostly under blankets. Did it feel different?

Did he not even take a chance to investigate? He feels like a failure.

His hands itch again and he looks past her shoulder at a poster on the wall, trying to focus on anything but the scene playing out in his head where she's naked and sprawled on the bed underneath him.

"I'mâ€¦" she looks back at up at him, eyes oddly clouded and heavy, and it snaps him most of the way out of that primal corner of his brain. "My pants don't fit," she complains, looking again at the traitorous denim like it's a snake she hasn't quite managed to kill.

"Um...did you try them on before or after you took off the brace?" He offers, eyes sliding down the curve of her waist and banking to stare pointedly at the black polyester and aluminum contraption on her bed.

"After," she rolls her eyes as if that much is obvious and looks down at that pale, skinny knee, slightly swollen around the joint.

"What do you want me to do?" He asks slowly, feeling more than slightly out of his element as he tries to focus on that poster instead of staring more at her legs.

No matter how obvious it is at the moment that she doesn't want him to stare, it's somehow nearly impossible not to.

"There's nothing you can do," she shrugs, suddenly angry instead of sad. "My pants don't fit."

"Is it because your knee is still swollen?" He asks, trying not to look down at the knee in question, because that'll only lead to looking at the thighs above it.

"No Hiccup," she snaps, face a lovely but uncomfortable shade of pink underneath a scolding glare, "it's not because my knee is still swollen."

"Okâ€|" he frowns. "Do you have other pants you can wear?" She doesn't seem appreciative of the suggestion, scoffing and crossing her arms.

"I've gained nine pounds," she spits it at him like he's been force feeding her with a funnel and he stands up straighter. "Nine."

"I'm sorry-"

"Nine whole pounds. I mean, look at this," she sits on the edge of the bed and jerkily shoves her feet into their respective pant legs, standing and tugging with a quiet grunt. The jeans slide all the way up with a final sharp yank, and she buttons and zips them with an irritated flourish.

"They fit ummâ€|" he trails off as he actually looks, swallowing again and stuffing stubbornly wanting hands deep into his pockets. There's something inexplicably alluring about that brand new curve of her inner thigh. He blinks slowly, heart throbbing in his throat and glances back towards her flushed face. "They look fine."

"They're skin tight!" She complains, twisting sideways and bending over halfway. His eyes fall automatically to the definitely rounder curve of her ass and widen impossibly.

She's always been gorgeous. He's always been attracted to her. But right now, some guttural, offensive, deep corner of his mind is telling him to throw her on the bed and peel those jeans-

He jerks his eyes up and stares pointedly at the wall, trying to think of anything but the image emblazoned on his brain.

"They are a little uh...tighter, I guess," he agrees as mildly as he can manage and she narrows those piercing blue eyes at him, scanning his face for a moment before her mouth falls open, aghast.

"You're checking me out!" She takes one still limping step backwards, crossing her arms and sitting heavily on the bed. He meets her answering glare for a brief second before holding his hands up in surrender and wondering just how soon she's leaving with Ruff.

Is this worth telling the truth? If he let half of what's running through his mind right now out into the open, they'd be in this room for hours. The dogs would never get dinner. He wouldn't get any homework done tonight.

It would be so unbelievably, completely worth it.

If she didn't end up thinking he's an absolute freak. And then she'll hit him and he probably won't ever get those stupid, opaque clothes off of her.

"I wasn't," he defends, and her face softens, sinking back into it's prior sad mask.

"Oh." She stares at her hands before reaching sideways for her brace and starting to buckle it carefully to her leg. Her fingers stumble over a buckle and he steps forward, carefully crouching and fastening the strap with nimble fingers. It's an electric shock every time his

skin brushes over those pants that aren't doing anything to conceal her warmth and he exhales calmly, looking up at her with a gentle grin. She sighs and shakes her head, chewing on her lip. "I...how could this happen? It's never happened before."

And either he's crazy, or the shadow peeking out from the v-neck of her shirt is deeper and more inviting than it's ever been before. He swallows and tries not to stare, tries so unbelievably hard not to trace the stark line of her bra with hungry eyes.

"It's...it's probably all those cupcakes you've been eating," he offers by way of explanation, successfully pegging his eyes to the wall over her shoulder. She freezes and sits up straight, mouth flapping silently. The doorbell rings and Hiccup jumps to his feet, eager for the excuse to leave as he points towards the door and shuffles backwards. "Door. I'm going to get the door. That's probably Ruff. She can come in and wait and you can be ready soon and door!" he babbles, looking at her one last time over his shoulder and stumbling gracelessly to the entryway.

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Oooh. I'd say that Hiccup shoved his foot in his mouth a little forcefully there...

**And I don't want to be a drag, but I can't help but notice reviews are steadily declining, and I'm assuming it has more to do with everyone being busy than anything, but I would still really appreciate knowing whether you guys are still reading and enjoying. I know that this is a super suckish time of year. Hello, finals.
**

**Good luck to everyone on your tests, I hope that mine don't murder me like they're so horribly keen to. **

**Oh, and I wanted to propose something. I know that there are probably a whole bunch of things in the chasing universe that you guys want to see—and it just so happens that I can't draw worth a damn and nothing would make me happier than some good old fashioned fan art. Maybe we can work out some deals? Either leave it in a review or a PM, but I will trade one-shots for fan art. **

10. Chapter 10

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"Are you absolutely sure you don't want any of this?" Ruff gestures towards Astrid with her half full bucket of caramel corn. Astrid shakes her head, scowling at the floor and trying to smell anything but the scrumptious half-burned sugar.

"I'm good."

"Seriously?" The taller girl picks a particularly coated nugget out and offers it to her friend, who is fixated on toes curling in the park's almost too long grass. "You're done eating everything in sight—"

"I gained almost ten pounds," Astrid blurts the dirty secret,

crossing her arms and almost knocking over her single crutch leaning against the bench.

"Psh, my coach ordered me to gain fifteen," Ruff rolls her eyes at the complaint, shoving a handful of popcorn into her mouth and chewing with a contented hum.

"I've never been over 110 in my life."

"Oh my god, I could bench press you!" Ruff clenches a field hockey defined bicep and Astrid can't seem to stop the real issue from flowing.

"Hiccup said it was because I've been eating too many cupcakes."

"Have you been eating a lot of cupcakes?" Ruff asks, brows furrowed, and Astrid shrugs.

"I guess."

"Wait...did you just randomly walk up to Hiccup and announce you'd gained weight?" She frowns. "Because you might want to think about some boundaries."

"No, I didn't just walk up to him and announce it," Astrid clarifies, examining her fingernails and chewing on a snaggle at the end of her pinky. "I was walking back to my room, because Hiccup has the only scale in the house, and I wasn't wearing pants and-"

"So wait, he told you mid-bang that you've been eating too much?" Ruff cackles, miming groping something with slightly sticky fingers. "'Astrid, stop with the cupcakes, they aren't going to your boobs like I'd hoped'," she poorly imitates Hiccup's nasal tone and Astrid elbows her in the ribs.

"Shut up," and she's suddenly keenly aware of her bra digging into her back in a completely novel and uncomfortable way. She shrugs to adjust a falling bra strap and stares at the ground. "And it wasn't mid-bang," she spits, nudging her discarded flip flops with suddenly interesting toes. "He stared at me, then decided he'd rather stare at the wall, then he helped me put on my brace," she enumerates the events on her fingers, understanding less about the situation the longer that she talks, "then he told me I'd been eating too many cupcakes."

"Hmâ€¦| "

"What?" Astrid perks up slightly, hoping Ruff has some magical answer about a remarkably similar situation.

Then again, there's nothing similar to or typical about Hiccup's strange and normally wonderful brain.

"That sounds like fairly normal Hiccup behavior," Ruff laughs. "Awkwardly staring at you and helping you with things you can do yourself. Right about on schedule."

"He's not...you make it sound like he has issues," Astrid rolls her eyes and taps her heel against the ground, gritting her teeth against

the odd tenseness that builds in her strengthening knee. "All I noticed is that he looked at me, then he refused to look at me."

"Why do you care?" Ruff shrugs, leaning back against the bench and stuffing another handful of popcorn in her mouth.

"Excuse me for being a little upset that I'm a cow now," Astrid barks, a little nauseous at the sentiment.

"You're not a cow. You're still a shrimp-" Astrid slugs her friend in the arm, gratified with Ruff flinches and returns the hit.

"I thought guys didn't notice this stuff," she shakes her head and grins slightly. "Remember when you got all your hair cut off last year and it literally took Fishlegs three days to notice?" The taller girl snorts and nods.

"He kept on asking me if something was different, but he couldn't put his finger on the fact that fifteen inches of my hair was missing," Ruff rolls her eyes and fiddles with the ponytail that again tickles her shoulderblades. "Hiccup didn't freak out over a few pounds."

"Well, he sort of did," Astrid frowns, chewing on her lip and trying to suppress a dangerous idea brewing in the back of her mind. "I'm sort of-what if it's not the cupcakes?"

"What do you mean?" Ruff shoves another handful of popcorn into her mouth.

"What if it's not the cupcakes?" she looks down, staring at the stressed button on the front of her jeans. "What if something else is happening?"

"Like sitting around instead of running?"

"No, what if I'm-It's really quick weight gain. What if I'm-"

"Did you miss a period or something?" Ruff cuts her off, too loud. Astrid glares at her, ignoring a young mother who looks her way judgmentally. "Oh my God, you did! Why didn't you tell me? This is-"

"I did not miss a period," she hisses, crossing her arms defensively. "But I'm just saying that the weight came on really quick. I practically blinked and it was there."

"Have you been puking?"

"Well, no," Astrid taps her good foot on the ground, attempting to relax. "But not everyone starts puking right away."

"Do you honestly think you could be pregnant?" Ruff has the tact to lower her tone a bit.

"Have you guys had an accident lately? Broken condom or something?"

"Well," Astrid blushes a dark pink as her worst fears are confirmed,

"we haven't exactly been _judicious_ about the condoms. Ever."

"Really?" Ruff raises her eyebrow, scooting a little closer and setting the caramel corn aside.

"I'm onâ€¦I'm on the pill, it's always just sort of been a 'whenever it's convenient' thing andâ€¦"

"What?" The question is far too loud, and the young mother drags her three year old boy away from the scene with a displeased glare. "You haven't beenâ€¦Have you had any mishaps with the pill?"

"No!" Astrid shakes her head, because suddenly her anxious concern is serious. "I mean Iâ€¦Wait," she thinks back to that morning and the weekday on her pills' foil sleeve. It said Sunday. It's Monday. "I'm a day off, I fell off somewhere along the wayâ€¦Iâ€¦Shit."

"Shit what?" Ruff leans closer, ponytail falling over her shoulder.

"I'm a day off, I don't know," she cradles her head in her hands, staring through the sieve of her fingers at her brace. "It was probably when I wasâ€¦I stayed in the hospital overnight, I didn't have it. I was out of it when I came home and didn'tâ€¦"

"Well, have you guys gotten around the brace?" Ruff looks at the thing gratefully for a second, because it might have been a suitable road block.

"Yes," Astrid groans, hands fisting in her hair and tugging. "Yes, a week ago. Not since," she frowns, ignoring the fact that her residual disappointment is the absolutely last thing she should be thinking about at the moment. "But it wasâ€¦It completedâ€¦"

"Eww, Astrid," Ruff sits up, "Don't call it that. Just say that he _came_ like a normalâ€¦"

"That's what you're going to do right now? Pick on my word choice?" Astrid slaps her good thigh, frustrated. "Should I go get a test? I should probably go get a test."

"You missed one day of birth control, I don't think you need to be freaking out this much."

"Butâ€¦oh shit," she moans, good foot tapping irritably against the ground. "Antibiotics too. I took them for a week? Ten days? Something like that. Isn't that supposed to disrupt birth control or something?"

"They would have warned you, right?" An uncomfortable heaviness starts to settle in Ruff's stomach as this whole situation strays farther from the humorous. "If it was a problem they would have told you."

"I don't exactly remember leaving the hospital. I was pretty out of it. Hiccup just told me what I was supposed to take."

"He would have realized that was an important thing to tell you," Ruff frowns. "Unless he was trying to knock you upâ€¦"

"Which is insane, and didn't happen," Astrid corrects before that line of inquiry can go any further. "Is itâ€|Is it too early to even take a test? I don'tâ€|I've never done this before."

"Neither have I. Both Fishlegs and I can work a condom."

"Thanks for that," Astrid rolls her eyes, grabbing her crutch and standing. "Come on, I've got to figure this out."

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Fifteen minutes later, they're in the feminine products aisle at the nearest bargain superstore, staring at the wall of tests promising first response. Ruffnut sighs and disappears for a moment, walking back from the neighboring shelf with a box of condoms. She throws them at Astrid who catches them with a totter on her crutches.

"How about you stock up on the baby gravy catchers and wait a couple of weeks," she suggests, gesturing to the overwhelmingly pink shelf. "See if this is actually something."

"I have a bad feeling," Astrid sighs, putting the condoms back on the shelf knowing full well that there's an unopened box at home. "I'd rather just be sure."

"This one says it lets you know six days after conception," Ruff picks up a box and reads the back. "So if you magically shoved that bun in the oven a week ago, this would let you know."

"Can you talk any louder? I can't quite hear you," Astrid snips, a large part of her trying to imbibe Ruff's sound logic. It's true, it's too soon, and she definitely wouldn't be putting on ten pounds in a week.

But what if it's half cupcakes and halfâ€|hormonal changes. That's possible, right?

"Jesus, that much sass, maybe you do have Hiccup's spawn in there."

"So comforting," Astrid rolls her eyes, stomach churning menacingly. It wouldn't be right to puke in the middle of the hallway. That would be bad. "Six days? I'll take that one."

"It's fifteen dollars," Ruff moves to put it back. "It's overkill, you're probably fine. Wait a week."

"I can't wait a week, sitting around is hard enough without this on my mind. Grab it, let's go," Astrid turns and limps towards the checkout counter, Ruff walking alongside her with the box in hand.

"How do you even piss on these things anyway? I think it'd be easier if you were standing, want to try the men's room?" Ruff asks, still too loud, and Astrid glares at her as she sets the test on the checkout counter. "Oh wait, you probably couldn't go urinal right now, with the crutches."

The teenage boy behind the register pointedly avoids eye contact as

he accepts Astrid's twenty dollar bill, trying not to look at her still flat stomach and failing.

"Seriously, could you be any louder?" Astrid accepts her change, stuffing it into her pinched pocket and picking up the pink box with finicky fingers, holding it close to her crutch handle and limping away.

"I'm just trying to help," Ruff rolls her eyes. "Unless you'd rather be doing this alone." She does hold the bathroom door for Astrid, holding a hand out to catch Astrid's crutches as she pulls up to the sink, unwrapping the test with shaking fingers.

"Of course not," she reads the instructions, frowning and trying to figure out how best to hold the thing. "I'm goingâ€¦yeah," she walks slowly towards the stall, the miracle of two working feet lost in the terror of her suddenly insubstantial good knee. She shuts the door behind her and wiggles her pants down, sitting on the toilet with a dramatic exhale that isn't calming like she wishes it were. "What if I pee on my hand?" She laughs at the absurdity of the question, holding the plastic stick between her legs over the bowl.

"You're twenty two years old, I'm going to take away your woman card if you can't aim your pee better than that."

"Sorry I don't practice aiming," Astrid scowls at the door, and it feels better than the vulnerability as she releases her bladder, holding the stick carefully underneath the stream. "And my aim is fine, by the way."

"Good to know," Ruff laughs, and it doesn't feel entirely out of place. "Let's hope Hiccup's aim is off."

"Charming."

"Or that he was writing his name instead of hitting the fly."

"Not actually funny right now, Ruff." She looks at the graffiti on the bathroom door in front of her and can't help but wonder if D still loves A. She honestly hopes so.

"I'm going to get a new best friend who appreciates me."

Astrid doesn't bother to answer the threat, finishing her business and setting the test aside on a square of toilet paper. She doesn't need to think hard to recall the directions, they're emblazoned in her brain like a still singing brand.

"Set a timer for three minutes," she orders, because it's more normal and in control than asking and Ruff follows direction, nervous despite knowing better. Astrid is fine. This is still terrifying.

"Alright, it's set." Astrid steps out of the stall a moment later, walking slowly and carefully to the sink and setting the fermenting test on the counter while she washes her hands. They have one of those foam soap dispensers that she always used to love as a kid.

She remembers that the first place she saw one was a Perkins

restroom, when she was there with her grandparents for breakfast on a Saturday morning. Her parents weren't there, probably back at home fighting, and she was maybe six or seven. She remembers her grandma smiling patiently while she washed her hands three times, playing with the fluffy soapy foam and automatic faucet.

She wishes her grandparents were still around. If she went back to her dad's house, she could probably get their phone number and give them a call.

They're probably still in Florida. She wonders if they ever left that condo, or if they're still complaining about their busybody landlord to anyone who will listen.

"How much time is left?" Astrid steps away from the sink, wiping her hands on her pants and pressing her palms tight to her thighs, trying to keep them from shaking.

"Two minutes and seven seconds," Ruff reads the time from her phone. "A third of the way there."

"What do I do if it says yes?"

"Then you go home and show it to Hiccup," Ruff answers seriously.

"And if it's a no?"

"Then you probably still go home and show it to Hiccup."

"You really do have all the answers, don't you," Astrid snaps, leaning against the sink and holding her right foot carefully off of the ground. "We've never even talked about this."

"No, Astrid, you and I haven't talked about taking pregnancy tests in bathrooms."

"You know what I mean," she stares at the ceiling, bouncing against the ball of her foot and gripping the corner of the sink too tightly. "Hiccup and I have never even talked about this. Notâ€"I don't think we've ever brought up kids."

"Really?"

"Have you and Fish?"

"He wants three," Ruff shrugs, smiling at the ground. "I'm thinking two, because with my luck it'll probably be twins, and that's hard enough."

"Come on," Astrid laughs to herself, "you're woman enough for three."

"How many do you want?" Ruff asks, "because I'll admit, I can't really see you as a mom with a huge brood."

"Iâ€"I haven't thought about it. Maybeâ€"I don't know."

"Do you even want kids?"

"I don't even know if Hiccup wants kids." Astrid swallows hard, and suddenly her mind is filled with an unwelcome montage of Hiccup as a dad. He'd be great at it, she doesn't doubt it. He'd be the guy to wake up in the middle of the night when it's crying, and stay up to help it with homework. "I'd be a shitty mom." No matter how blunt and true the statement is, it does hurt. Hiccup would be wonderful. Her? Not so much.

She'd be so worried about the kid being something that she'd forget to appreciate what they were.

"Fifteen seconds." Astrid's stomach flips.

"Way to shirk the question."

"Hey, this seems like boyfriend talk territory," Ruff smirks to herself. "And considering I'm not the one knocking you upâ€"

The timer beeps.

"Shit," Astrid can't look, her head feels cemented into place, vertebrae stubborn and rigid. "I can'tâ€"

"Fine," Ruff steps forward and grabs the test, frowning at the little screen and trying to make sense of what she sees. "One line on the pee-stick."

"One line?" Astrid's face lights up. "Are you sure? One line?"

"Yeah, is that good or bad?"

"Negative," Ruff looks alarmed before Astrid's face cracks into a wide grin. "It's negative. The test is negative. I'm good!"

"I knew you would be, you only missed one day of your pill."

"Killjoy. I'm not pregnant," Astrid stumbles forward and wraps uncharacteristically needy arms around her friend's shoulders, squeezing hard enough for it to hurt. "Not pregnant."

"I'm happy for you," Ruff wheezes, twisting Astrid into a headlock before letting her go. "Now can we get back to our original afternoon?" But she's smiling, and Astrid visibly relaxes, holding out a hand for her crutches.

"What is your mysterious errand anyway?"

"Hey, I was having fun talking about your problems," Ruff grins. "And peeing on sticks-"

"Come on-"

"And you'd know what the errand is if you hadn't ditched me to play sexy gimp with your boyfriend. Hot, unprotected gimp sex-"

"Sexy gimp?" Astrid tries to be angry, but settles for a snort. She can't be angry right now. Not when she's so close to her relief. "Nothing sexy about being gimpy, Ruff."

"Really?" she frowns, "I was thinking it might be kind of hot. You know, get some scrubs and play nurse Hiccup ."

"Stop thinking about nurse Hiccup," Astrid snaps, suddenly possessive of the not unpleasant mental image. "And it's going to be awhile before I'm dying to indulge in nurse Hiccup. Iâ€|" she glances back towards that test and swallows hard.

"Condoms. Use the condoms. Plus, how else are you going to use all this gimp time. Get back on the horse. I'm jealous."

"It's really just...not anything to be jealous of. I can't exercise enough, so I can't sleep. I'm cranky and hungry and gaining weightâ€|" she sighs and leans forward, rubbing her temples with the pads of her fingers. "It's freaking me out...as you can see."

"That sounds like an off season. There are worse reasons for weight gain." Ruff tosses the used plastic stick into the trash and starts washing her hands, in case Astrid's aim was worse than she said.

"God, this happens every time your season ends?" Astrid grimaces, hugging herself and trying not to focus on the new softness around the points of her hips. Happy softness, unimportant softness that she can burn off. She just has to go home and burn it off. Eat apples, stop with the cupcakes.

No matter how good cupcakes sound.

"Well, I don't sit around on a couch for two weeks and eat cup-" Ruff pauses while Astrid elbows her again, "cakes."

"I'll get it back," Astrid resolves after a quiet moment, nodding resolutely. "It's only a few weeks until I can start running again. I'll get it back."

"Good, at least you sound like you now," Ruff smiles.

"So, what is this errand again? I've been too busy sexy gimping."

"And learning awful jokes from Hiccup," Ruff teases. "I have to go dress shopping. Fishlegs' cousin is getting married next weekend."

"Oh wow, family events," Astrid nods slowly, understanding her friend's persistent resistance to behave as permanently as she obviously feels. "I'm surprised you're not planning on pajamas."

"He really likes his cousin," Ruff nods, a little smaller, a little less dominant and leaching sweetness that she normally guards with everything she has. "And his parents will be there, and...so I can't look like a man or a hooker, and I need your help."

"Well, let's get going, because it takes me hours to walk anywhere," Astrid jokes, adjusting her crutches under her arms.

"Look at you, joking about being fat and gimpy," Ruff grins, holding open the bathroom door and following Astrid out into the parking

lot.

"Not funny. You're taking me to buy vegetables after this," Astrid's stomach growls at the suggestion and she shakes her head. "Lots and lots of vegetables."

"Whatever you say fatty." Astrid is more than a little proud when she manages to shove Ruff off of the path, and even happier that her annoying crutches are successful in preventing a violent retort. "So, when are you ditching the crutches?" Ruff asks, elbowing Astrid almost gently in the side.

"Why?"

"So I can return that favor," she gestures over her shoulder to where she'd so gracefully exited the path. Entirely of her own volition. "No, but seriously. How much longer on the crutch?"

"I can walk short distances without it now, but I'm still working on getting the knee straight," Astrid laments, suddenly hyper aware of the head of the crutch butting against that tenderized place on the inside of her arm.

"Damn, you can't straighten your knee?" Ruff looks down at the joint like it's a sideshow attraction and Astrid shrugs, turning away to hide an embarrassed flush.

See? She's not crazy. It is absolutely ridiculous that she can't even straighten her own knee. It should straighten itself.

"I can, but it's just...stubborn." She wants to vindicate herself and explain that in repairing the damage, they shortened her ACL, and that it's going to take time to stretch it. Somehow it doesn't feel worth it, like Ruff is just going to be a voice for that inner worry that it's not stretching the way that it should, and if Astrid were trying harder, it would be better already.

She vows to spend an extra fifteen minutes that night. She's sure Hiccup will be excited, especially that she's trying to get back into shape. Should she even tell him about the...scare? It seems wrong to walk in with an illegitimate excuse for the weight, but she almost wants to scare him. She wishes that the plunge back to fitness could happen all at once, and straightening that leg would erase those eight pounds, but he'll appreciate the effort that she's trying, won't he?

Why does she care so much?

It hurts to know that all this time she's been ten pounds from rejection.

"Out stubborn-ed by your own knee," Ruff shakes her head. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"I'm notâ€¦" she remembers Hiccup running with Spike, and the stubborn nub in her throat watching the meet that she should have been at. "I just need a few weeks. I talked to that Nike rep last week. This could still happen."

"You think Nike still might happen?" The taller girl raises her

eyebrows, and Astrid can't help but recognize the expression her friend uses to discern if Tuff really is daft enough to fall for some prank. She steels her expression, nodding to herself, suddenly determined.

She's supposed to start the exercise bike this week. She'll do it tonight. It's better than some conversation about kids she doesn't want to think about.

"Hey, I'll be back up in a few weeks," Astrid defends, and she's so relieved not to sound hurt and bored and retired for the first time in weeks. "And everyone loves an underdog."

"As if you'll ever be an underdog," Ruff rolls her eyes, grin genuine and free from normally dangerous insinuations. Astrid returns the expression with a flippant shrug.

"Exactly. I'm a sure bet."

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Thuggory had a girlfriend for a few months, sophomore year of college, and Hiccup felt like he was thrust into being cameraman for some bizarre nature show. First off, she was a geophysicist, and hot in that way that made Hiccup constantly feel like she was sizing up everyone around her and comparing them to some unreachable standard. At first, Thuggory seemed to like that, he liked thinking that he was the standard, and that someone chose him over all of their other options.

But it never really turned into anything healthy, and she never seemed to stop flirting with other guys, mostly future petroleum engineers planning to be rich, and everything eventually fizzled out without much fanfare.

Hiccup walked away completely beyond content in his own relationship at the same time as he started to realize just how little he really knew about dating and women.

Astrid? He knows everything about Astrid. He knows that she likes her coffee in the afternoon, with milk and no sugar, and he knows that she puts on her right sock before her left one or she feels off for the rest of the day. He knows that she's a sucker for mountain views, and that she suffers from an inexplicable mistrust of cats.

He has absolutely no idea what he'd do if she suddenly started acting like Ms. Geophysicist and dropping cross worded hints around pretending that they're conversation.

Trust has always been something implicit in their relationship, and it still is. He knows that she and Ruff aren't doing anything crazy...well, maybe crazy, but nothing that would affect him in the long run. Nothing cruel, nothing that should make him nervous.

But he can't seem to wriggle away from the uncomfortable tightness in his chest when he remembers her face earlier that afternoon. Screwed up into some semblance of placid, eyes churning and tumultuous behind a faltering glaze. She used to be so good at hiding, at clamping everything down behind a diamond curtain and reflecting people outward, but that's faded over the years into the occasional peeved

and uncomfortable silence while he struggles to figure out what he did wrong.

Most of the time it's rather obvious, like falling asleep when she was talking to him or being half an hour late to pick her up when it's snowing in Boulder and she's locked out of the athletic complex. Then it's an apology and a five minute rant on her part, and everything is back to normal. Then there are the times where it's something smaller, a shoe left in a dark hallway for her to trip over, or if she gets the idea into her head that he hasn't been paying Spike equal attention while she's away at school. Those times are worse, weaseling it out of her while she tries to squash the anger down into a nonevent.

He can tell that he did something wrong, from the way she avoided eye contact entirely and left without saying anything to him, even though she paused to let Toothless sloppily kiss her chin. And the wolf looked smug about it for an hour afterwards, trading between staring at Hiccup victoriously and murmuring with Spike sprawled out in a sunny patch on the floor. Once the sun went down, they relocated to curling around his feet, with Toothless eventually realizing his gloating was not appreciated and sitting to rest a comforting chin on Hiccup's knee.

"It was the staring, wasn't it?" He nods after too long pretending to be working when really he's staring off into space, searching for an answer. "That was even less cool of me than normal, staring at her like that." He strokes Toothless's ears, scratching along the stiff cartilage at their base and thumbing the soft triangles. "But...what does she really expect, walking around like that?"

Toothless cocks his head and pants, torn between disappointed and charmed by his boy's innocence.

"I know that gaining weight is bad," he shakes his head, obviously confused, "but it doesn't look bad, bud. It doesn't look bad at all." He bites his lip and scratches along Toothless's jaw. "Not that she looked...it was good before and why am I telling you this? You're the one kissing her," he shuns the dog briefly, turning back to his laptop and trying to reclaim his train of thought. "Ok, ok. She kissed you," Hiccup gives in after a minute, feeling more than a little ridiculous as his hand falls back onto the top of the wolf's head. "I know that she's not your umm...species, but...wow.

"There's this new curve," he blushes, but this somehow feels good to talk about, and it's not like Toothless is going to be running around telling anyone. Spike grumbles and shoots Hiccup a tired doggy glare that almost feels like it's being transmitted from Astrid, wherever she is. "It's a compliment, Spike. The new curve is...very nice. Very very nice," he clears his dry throat and swallows, tapping his metal foot against the leg of the coffee table. "But she's not happy about it.

"I really don't get it. I don't care how much she weighs, I'm pretty sure she's the only one who actually cares about that." He drums his fingers against the still strong muscles on Toothless's neck, stroking a pensive thumb across the few gray hairs sprouting along the wolf's jawline. "Looking pretty wise there, bud, any advice?" He waits for a second and Toothless smiles, tongue lolling to the side of of his mouth, obviously mocking. "Oh, so funny. Astrid's mad at

me. You should consider a career in comedy."

Spike sits up the rest of the way, staring Hiccup down with no nonsense eyes and he leans forward to get closer to her level. Her tongue betrays her serious expression, sneaking out to lick the tip of his nose.

"I'm guessing it's a girl thing, isn't it?" Hiccup asks the pit, who cocks her head and whuffs deep in her throat. "I swear, I thought it would be handy having you around, and that you would help me figure out mysterious woman things, but you're even more of a vault than Astrid is," Hiccup shakes his head slowly and Spike looks downright pleased with herself, mouth falling open into a smile. "Am I the only one in this house that doesn't speak Astrid?"

Spike rumbles and lays down against Hiccup's foot, comforting in an utterly pedantic way.

Great, he's too lost for dogs to deign to give him advice.

It's five minutes later when his dad gets home, and Hiccup meets him in the kitchen, somehow eager for someone human to talk to at the same time as dreading anything real drifting into the air between them. His dad freezes in the doorway and nods in greeting, flushed red from what Hiccup assumes is the warmth of the house compared to the breezy mountain air outside.

"Hey son," the large man greets, looking fixedly at a white swirl in the granite countertop.

"Hi dad."

"Soâ€|" Gerard exhales and rubs his hands together, looking towards the stairs with an unguarded, eager expression. "I should probably be getting to bed. Long day."

"It's seven thirty," Hiccup frowns at the clock on the oven, hedging a step closer to his father.

"I don't have the energy you do," Gerard blurts, grinning before his expression falls flat. Hiccup narrows his eyes.

"What does my energy have to do with anything?"

"Nothing," he twiddles thick thumbs, looking aimlessly around the room. "Soâ€|"big week at school?"

"Not really," Hiccup shrugs, smiling to himself as Toothless and Spike mill into the room, requesting attention from Gerard with squinting smiles. "Just working on my final project."

"How's that going?"

"Great...if knees bent the opposite direction," Hiccup laughs, suddenly exasperated just thinking about it. "But it's alright. I should have it done in time."

"That's good to hear," Gerard nervously looks over Hiccup's shoulder and frowns at the empty couch, simultaneously relaxing against the counter as he realizes there's no risk of a gaping repeat. "Where's

Astrid?"

"Out with Ruff," Hiccup sighs, running a hand back through his hair and slouching further.

"I'm glad she's getting out of the house."

"Me too," Hiccup nods, "she doesn't do so well stir crazy." No matter how uncomfortable Gerard feels with the still unconfronted everything that he saw last week, that parental urge kicks into high gear in response to Hiccup's uncharacteristically long face.

"So, if it's not your project, what's wrong?"

"Hmm?" He looks up, eyes zooming back to the present.

"What's wrong? You look like you lost Toothless."

"Nothing...I-" he looks around the room, arms falling slack against his sides. "You know when someone is mad at you, and you're sure that it's something you did, but you can't figure out exactly what?" Hiccup asks faux-rhetorically, hands wavering by his sides.

"So Astrid's mad at you."

"I didn't say _that_ per sayâ€|"

"Oh, so Toothless is mad at you," Gerard gestures towards the wolf, who is making himself comfortable with a bone on the floor near Hiccup's foot.

"Leave the sarcasm to me, dad," Hiccup wrinkles his nose and manages a smile before sighing even more heavily. "Yeah, I'm relatively sure that Astrid's mad at me."

"And you don't have any idea why?"

Could it possibly be that she wants more romance, rather than liaisons on practically public furniture in the early evening? If only.

"She's ummâ€|" he pauses, wondering if her less than thrilling news is on the table. Honestly, he doesn't feel like has much choice here, drifting along this far out of his element. "She was complaining earlier that since she stopped running she...put on a bit of weight-"

"Not our place," Gerard cuts his son off, nodding resolutely. "That's something you don't talk about with women."

"Well, no one ever told me that."

"I didn't think you needed to be told," Hiccup's father shrugs. "You and Astrid seemed to be doing alright last week."

"What do you mean by that?" The older man flushes and stutters, and for a second, Hiccup sees his own embarrassed reflection.

"You guys have just been getting alongâ€|" Hiccup eyes his father critically, like code that's running _almost_ smoothly. "Well I...I

came home last week and you two were on the couch-

"What?" Hiccup's eyes widen and he stumbles backwards, fumbling his false foot over Toothless's side and staring towards his closest escape route. Which, of course, happens to be towards that couch, and all those suddenly fresh memories of welcoming open hips and the cool breeze from the kitchen that wafted pleasantly over his back. Oh God, his father definitely saw all that.

His flush deepens and he tugs his pants a little further up, wishing his belt were tighter.

At least Astrid would have been shielded.

"Closed doors, son," Gerard mumbles, leaning forward as if to extend an arm and pat Hiccup's shoulder before rethinking the gesture and holding his wrists in front of him. He probably shouldn't touch the counter, he doesn't know where his naked kids have been.

It's even worse if he phrases it like that.

"Yeah...er, sorry."

"Really. Closed doors."

"Won't happen again," Hiccup nods earnestly, vowing to carry Astrid to the bedroom if he has to the next time she gets frisky in the living room. If he's lucky enough to have her get frisky with him again anytime soon.

"And tell Astrid that she looks fine." The man thinks for a moment. "Even great. Just say she looks great...Not that I saw or know anything about that-

"Dad!"

"Because I didn't see."

"We're done with this conversation, I'm leaving the room-

"Just tell her that she looks great. I'll...I'm going to give Gobber a call, he wanted to hear about my trip...closed doors. Really."

Hiccup somehow doesn't feel like it's going to be quite that easy, but he nods anyway, now impossibly more eager to escape this discussion. He shouldn't have asked. He should have just assumed that he'd said something stupid.

Plus, he can't exactly explain to his dad that Astrid does look great, fantastic really, and that he'd really be excited to get a little closer to all of that...new softness. It does look appetizing!

He shakes his head.

"Yeah. I'd say that's pretty solid advice," he rubs a sheepish hand up the back of his neck and his dad pats the counter, large fingers spread over the granite as if to take up as much space as possible.

"I'll...call Gobber from the car," Gerard bows out more gracefully than Hiccup could have. "And _locked_ doors. Not just closed doors. Locked."

"Right, noted. I've got...stuff to do," he glances sheepishly back towards his homework on the coffee table in front of the _couch_ and backs more gracefully over Toothless, sighing as his dad plods back towards the garage.

If saying anything at all was wrong, he's starting to think mentioning cupcakes might have been that fatal blow.

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**Ok you guys, good luck on any finals in the near future, and thank you so much for the fantastic response to the last one. For those of you thinking it was slow, I hope that this chapter started to pick up the pace. **

**Oh! And I've been told to get you guys excited, the sequel to Midoriko-sama's "Becoming Lifbrasir" is in its final stages, and I have to say that it's great. I don't have a date for you yet, but I'll keep on it! So start getting excited. **

**Thanks! **

11. Chapter 11

**Warning, alarmingly long chapter ahead. **

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Astrid finally gets home around ten, shoving through the front door and scowling at Hiccup briefly before looking back to the floor. She stalks towards her room with surprising speed on those still out of place crutches, not slowing as the dogs trot eagerly by her heels, looking for attention. Hiccup jogs a couple of steps to catch up with her, sheepish and shoving his hands in his pockets as he pulls even.

"Hey Astrid!"

"I have to change," she cuts him off, voice low and muddled, ducking into her bedroom and waiting impatiently for him to step back out of the range of the door. Hiccup sighs and concedes, and Spike gives him a withering look before trotting inside and sitting by the foot of the bed.

"Ok," he mutters, stepping back into the middle of the hallway and sighing as she shuts the door. He hears her crutches fall to the ground and a dresser drawer yanked out with far more force than is really necessary. "Umm...what did you do with Ruff?" Hiccup asks, stepping a bit closer to the wood. Toothless gives him a disappointed look and sits, grumbling low in his throat, because obviously he knows far more about talking to angry women .

"She needed advice dress shopping," Astrid grumbles, voice strained and muffled by the door. Spike's tail smacks rhythmically against the

food board, and she mumbles something inarticulate and generally sweet to the dog. "Andâ€¦" she pauses, growling and stomping her good foot.

"And what?"

"And nothing, Hiccup." She sounds more sad than mad, and the urge to hug her wells up in his throat.

"How'd shopping go?" He asks quietly, stepping closer to the closed door. She'd open if he knocked. It's probably not even locked, he could just open it-

"She found something," Astrid opens the door, taken aback by his closeness and staring daggers into his stomach. "Excuse me."

Hiccup sighs and steps aside, rubbing a hand up the back of his neck. If she's reduced to that polite anger, then he must have really muddled something. Polite Astrid is leagues more terrifying than fierce Astrid, whose emotions are absolutely plain and legible on her face. Polite Astrid is a black box, opening at her own leisure and unsusceptible to outside pressure.

"What are you up to now?" He asks, following behind her as she stalks back down the hallway, crutch-less and slower, but still even. His eyes catch on gym shorts that are definitely tighter than they've ever been before, and he gulps, closing his eyes briefly before focusing back on her angrily swinging ponytail.

"I'm hungry. Then I'm going downstairs," she snips, walking into the kitchen and trying to hide how hard she's breathing from that short distance. Her knee brace is almost too tight, holding her lightly throbbing leg together with loathed and familiar straps as she scowls at the cookie jar and tears a banana off of the bunch, unpeeling it and sighing.

She wants the cookies. She needs to be done with the cookies.

Secrets make her want cookies.

Hiccup loathes the quickening in his chest when she pensively holds the peeled banana to her lips and stares at the floor, tapping her bad foot almost rhythmically. The well-loved running shoes look absolutely strange beneath the line of her brace and he frowns, focusing on them rather than her long fingered hand wrapped around the base of her snack.

"What are you doing downstairs?" Her answering glare could not be clearer in screaming for him to leave her alone. His stomach drops like a stone when she takes a large bite of the banana, and he steps backwards, steeling himself before plowing forward. "I'm just asking because of the shoes."

"I'm supposed to try the stationary bike." She snaps, edging around him, back pressed against the edge of the counter to avoid any accidental contact. "So I'm going to go try it."

"I thought that was supposed to be later this week."

"They didn't specify," she calls over her shoulder, gripping the railing down to the basement and hopping down neatly on her good foot.

He stares at the open door for a moment before following. She's already on the bike, tossing the thankfully empty banana peel into a nearby trashcan and notching her good foot into the pedal. Her right foot takes a moment, unresponsive and oddly heavy as she tries two or three times to thread her toes through the loop before succeeding and bracing her weight against the ball of her foot with a quiet hiss. Hiccup cringes as her face colors crimson and she bites her lip, pushing against her good foot uncharacteristically cautiously.

"That looks like it hurts."

"It's about time I think about getting back into shape," she grunts, concentrating on moving her bad leg in slow, sweeping circles, straightening at the apex of each orbit. It stings, the stretch instantaneously too much before shrinking back into a slack, almost comfortable position. She wishes Hiccup weren't watching her, practically forcing her to notice the unusual bite of her shorts into the side of her thigh where they used to be baggy.

"It's barely been two weeksâ€"

"I can count." She can count all seven of the days since he last touched her. She can count the scariest three minutes of this whole ordeal and the list of people who should have been there. Hiccup. She should have called him.

"Astrid, they said to try this by the end of the weekâ€"

"And I'll stay away from the cupcakes too, alright?" She cuts him off with a snap, scalding blue eyes briefly meeting his and searing past her uncomfortably frigid exterior. He swallows hard, cringing as his suspicion is confirmed.

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Yeah, the whole refusal to look at me was obvious enough," she rolls her eyes, testing the waters and speeding up slightly, cringing immediately and turning down the bike's resistance with a scowl. The throbbing in her knee is slowly amping up, a second heart beat being born in her leg and taunting her with its nearly audible weakness. "Andâ€| the secret doesn't leak out and her mouth flaps silently.

"I wasn'tâ€"

"No, you stared at the wall," she insists, slowing down with a cringing pout as her knee pulls worse. "And then you decided it was time to be honest, and call me out on being _fat_."

"That's not what happened," he backs up, eyes wide and apologetic as she pushes a little faster, wincing before gritting her teeth and closing pained eyes. "Can you stop doing that?"

"I'm working off thoseâ€|cupcakes," she grunts, breathing too hard and wishing that endorphins would kick in and make her feel normal.

"Astrid, stop."

"I'll _do_ what I want." Her knee is starting to feel looser, throbbing but warm and almost stretched enough behind the glaze of pain.

He hates seeing the way her face crumples with every push, and it's worse knowing that this is in no small part, his fault. She flinches and sets her shoulders and jaw with equal strength, exhaling calmly and pushing forward with that serene calm that he'll never manage.

He can't watch this anymore. This is horrible. She's hurting herself because she thinks she's somehow less than what she was because of some stupid number, and it's making all of that already struggling uselessness even worse.

He should have told her earlier. He should have just bitten the bullet and faced the embarrassment.

"Astrid, stop, I like it," he blurts, hands held out towards her in a calming gesture below his flushed face. She snorts.

"Like what? That I'm back to work?"

"No, I like the ummâ€¦the weight you gained?" That sounds awful, and she stops pedaling, opening her eyes to glare at him, almost quizzically put out. "It'sâ€¦something aboutâ€¦I mean, I likeâ€¦"

"Were you checking me out earlier?" Astrid asks slowly, hands resting on her knees as the whirring weight in the bike comes to a silent stop.

"You weren't wearing pants," he shrugs, flushed and sheepish. "And then you put on pants, and they were _really_ _tightâ€¦"

"Why did you lie?" She asks, too upset to sound truly terse as she hugs herself, not used to that layer of softness on her once firm and grooved stomach. Her empty stomach that she really should tell him about.

"I thought you'd be mad," he admits with a too violent shrug. "I didn't want you to be freaked out and hit me, or something."

"I wouldn't have hit you," and she sounds leagues more confident on the matter than Hiccup feels.

"I was checking you out," he admits, gesturing towards those deeply distracting bare legs and looking aimlessly around the room. "And it just seemed like a bad time andâ€¦yeah."

"I'm notâ€¦ugh, I don't look _normal_. I haven't felt normal in weeks, and now I don't look normal either."

"You lookâ€¦different," he takes in what he hadn't quite noticed yet, the slim curve of the outside of her thigh, and the way that her shirt is clinging to her slightly exaggerated waistline. Her subtly curvier hips made obvious by her erect posture as she crosses her

arms, jiggling anxious feet against the pedals.

He drags his eyes back to her face.

Of course, she's still tiny. She's always been skinny, and that hasn't changed in the slightest. He can still see the washboard of her ribs along her side, and her collarbones still cast a shadow below her neck.

"Great," she pouts, climbing off of the bike and slumping to sit on the bench pressing station beside it, cradling her head in her hands. "Fantastic."

Hiccupâ€|there's some truth to the fact that men aren't necessarily wildly perceptive. Hiccup doesn't notice bad hair days and blemishes, and haircuts less than six inches. He doesn't notice new clothes, or the fact that she looks horrible first thing in the morning.

If he notices this change beyond the numbers that she told him, it must be big, fundamental.

She misses her old body already. It took years to come to terms with the lack of dramatic curves and small letter of her cup size. Between Hiccup and all those successful races, everything finally started to feel right. Comfortable even. She was happy in her skin, content and unworried about bulking up or trimming down.

Maintaining.

And now she's back in line for that roller-coaster, farther back than she's ever been and absolutely unsure if they'll let her on or if it's even worth it to give it a try.

She sighs, sitting up and closing her eyes, rubbing a tired palm over her forehead. It's not a big deal. She can handle this, just like she handles everything else. Hiccup takes her melting glare and mounting anguish as his cue to step in, clearing his throat before talking.

"You do look different," he starts gently, stepping hesitantly forward and sitting down at the opposite end of the bench. "But it's a good different."

"I thought you liked how I looked before," she snaps, and the real problem comes out into the air.

He's either been lying for years, or he's lying now.

"I did," he affirms like he's talking to a scared puppy. He misses volunteering at the new shelter, and his comfort feels rusty, but he's smart enough to know that Astrid still needs him around more than she admits. "I love you, I don't care if you weigh two hundred pounds."

"So it is worse then," she nods solemnly and looks back towards the bike, gritting her teeth and moving to stand up. Hiccup's hand lands on her good knee, comparatively cool and comforting and she relaxes with an indignant huff, staring pointedly at the wall.

"I've alwaysâ€|you've neverâ€|" he gestures to her again, flushed and

letting his eyes wander in an attempt to get his point across. "I've always liked everything about you," she tries not to smile, "but some curious," she twists slightly to face him, and her shirt stretching in a strange new way across her chest, "very very curious part of me really likes _this_."

"It does?" She asks, doubting and nervous. There must be some way to prove this, one way or the other. After a too quiet moment, a coy smile rises tentatively to her cheeks. "Can you help me with something?"

"Sure," he nods, too happy that she doesn't sound peeved with him in the moment. She stands on her good foot and shuffles over to him, obviously stiffer than before her escapade on the bike. He's genuinely worried until she spins to face away from him, and the tighter back of those shorts is a foot in front of his face.

"I think I did something to the left side, mind checking it out?"

"The left side of your ummâ€¦" And it looks even better up close, with those shorts stretched tight over the plump flesh. His hand is shaking slightly as he lifts it, hovering a few inches away while she watches over her shoulder, failing to look disinterested.

"Left cheekâ€¦it feels tight," she frowns, "well, if you don't _want_ to help meâ€¦"

"No, I do," he cuts her off, reaching up and cupping her rear through her shorts, heart beating far too fast considering the sheer number of times that he's touched her. He squeezes the decidedly different texture and can't feel anything concerning through the excited throbbing in his fingertips.

"Soâ€¦am I alright?" She asks, wiggling her hips back against his palm. He clears his throat and nods, standing and spinning her to face him, catching her with a hand on her lower back. "I _asked_ you to look behind me," she grins sheepishly and he laughs, fingers stroking along a slightly curvier waist that makes his face unreasonably hot.

"I don't think you're hurt," he gulps as she leans into him, hands warm and small against his chest.

"Really?" She cocks her head, wrapping long arms around the back of his neck and pulling herself onto one set of eager tip toes. Her lips brush eagerly against the side of his neck and she grins at the throbbing pulse under her lips.

Being hurt is horrible. Being hurt and gaining weight is impossibly worse. The look of haphazard appreciation in Hiccup's eyes is something akin to magic diffusing into her current state of mind and she clings to it, nuzzling behind his ear and earning a strangled gasp.

"Yeah, I think you're alright," he nods, hand sliding up between her shoulder blades, slow and almost confident. She kisses under his jaw, bolstering him onward.

This is more _fun_ than exercising, or worrying over all the walking

she can't really do right now and all of the foreign secrets lurking in her brain. This is here and now and a far more enticing plan.

Not to mention that it's sort of nice to have something new to try without all of the usual required effort.

"Just alright?" Astrid purrs against his skin, leaning forward enough to draw obvious attention to the tent in his pants. She pulls back just enough to quirk a curious eyebrow at him, staring purposefully over towards the stairs. "It does still sort of hurtâ€|ache really," she complains, happy to be playing wide eyed and innocent for a while. "Maybe you'd rub it a bit?"

He still has condoms in his bedroom, right? How is she going to explain to him that he has to use a condom?

"Astridâ€|" he looks down at her, torn between pleading and something brave. She grins because she's almost there, and the switch is ready to toggle between her fingers.

She could just say that she's a day off on her pill and tell him that she wants to be careful.

He might get nervous, he might ask.

"Come on, it's soreâ€"mph!" She moans against suddenly insistent lips prying hers apart as his tongue eagerly invades her mouth. Astrid returns the favor, fingers scrabbling at soft auburn hair as she stretches further onto already exhausted toes.

"Astrid," he groans against her lips, hands clenching and gripping at her waist, working her shirt up and smoothing soft fingers over her stomach.

"Hiccup?" She mutters against his cheek as he nips down her neck, yanking the neck of her shirt aside. "I thought-I thought I was pregnant." The secret burst out when she least intends it to.

Hiccup drops her faster than she would have thought possible, lunging backwards and staring at her, wide eyed and heaving through kiss swollen lips.

"Y-youâ€" "

"I'm a day off in my pill this month, I missed while I was in the hospital," she admits, staring at his mismatched feet and crossing her arms over her stomach. "And the weight gain, I was hoping it wasâ€|I didn't know how to deal with it andâ€"it was just a whim?" He blinks slowly, eyebrows slowly rising towards his hairline. His mouth flaps, chest shuddering underneath strangely rigid shoulders. "Are you alright?"

"Nph," he mumbles, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his inhaler, taking a slow puff and holding his breath for a moment before exhaling. "Iâ€"Iâ€"Iâ€" "

"Iâ€"we went and got a test, but it was negative, but it could be too early to take one anyway, but I think I overreacted. I only missed one day, and I'm babbling. Say something." She wrings her hands, taking a step towards him and reaching for his hand. It clenches into

a tight fist.

"You didn't tell me? You thought you wereâ€|and you didn't tell me?" His voice cracks and he clears his throat, breath shuddering irritably on the way out of his mouth.

"It was for a few minutes, Iâ€|false alarm."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It didn't seem like anything, it was just aâ€|joke, and then I realized it could be legitimate and it spiraled out of controlâ€|"

"Youâ€|you should have called orâ€|I would have been there, you know." He's genuinely hurt, jaw flexing towards her, so menacingly earnest.

"I know you would have. I just wanted toâ€|I took care of it, it's nothing."

"You said it might have been too early to take a test," he swallows hard, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"Yeah, it was only a week ago when weâ€|I've never been in this situation before."

"Whenâ€|when are you supposed toâ€|?" He looks down at those tighter shorts, and just how good they look floats to the back of his mind.

"A week?" She nods slowly, "and last month I was on schedule." He's always known, it's one of those things that got hard to hide, and never really seemed worth sneaking around. And it was refreshing, just how calm he always was about the entire situation.

Scott was always soâ€|grossed out, yelping like a little girl if he saw tampons in her backpack. Hiccup offers to run to the store for her and keeps the bathroom stocked and has always been absolutely content with snuggling for a week while she snarled a little too ferociously at nothing in particular.

"So we know in a week. For sure."

"I know for sure now," Astrid crosses her arms and snarls at the floor. "I took a test. I'm good."

"We are good," Hiccup spits at her through gritted teeth, suddenly angry and formidable. "_We_. _Us_. This wouldn't just be you. This would be our problem and ourâ€|and you didn't even _tell_ me."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Can you? Iâ€|I need to sit down," he looks around the room, at the uncomfortable bench near the weights and shakes his head. "I'm going to bed, Iâ€|"

"Can we talk about this?" She shuffles between him and the door, cautious hands landing against the front of his shoulders. "Because I

didâ€"Do I get any points for telling you now?"

"Were you just not going to tell me at all?" His voice cracks again, but there's nothing funny about it.

"I didn't know how."

"How about, 'Hey Hiccup, I think I'm pregnant'," he coughs, face an unhealthy shade of red. "Because that sounds pretty reasonable to me."

"It's not that easy," she edges a little closer, fingers curling in the front of his shirt. "I'mâ€"I was scared, and Ruff was right, and she was asking about a test and I justâ€"I just did it."

"I'm pretty scared right now," he admits quietly, hands twitching at his sides with the urge to touch her. "Iâ€""

"Can we talk about this?" She asks again, closing her eyes and sighing. "I just needâ€"I need to sit down, and we need to talk about this."

"Let's go upstairs," he nods curtly, still not making eye contact as he urges her towards the stairs. "I feel likeâ€"privacy? Yeah, privacy."

"Sure," Astrid scoots away, hopping a bit on her good foot. "Your room?" She spins slowly and grabs the banister next to the stairs, knee stiff underneath her.

"Does your knee hurt?" He asks, eyes flitting briefly down her legs before fixing back on her ponytail. "I can help you up, if you want."

"I'm fine, Hiccup. They're just stairs." He steps up beside her, wrapping an arm around her waist and taking some of her weight.

"I want to help," he pulls her a little closer to his side, walking faster up the stairs and setting her back on her two feet at the top. "When you need help, I want to help."

Spike looks up from her half of the dog bed, rolling her eyes in a remarkably human way before flopping back down onto Toothless's haunch and falling back asleep. Hiccup gets the distinct impression that she's on his side this time.

"Your room," she repeats, shuffling alongside him down the hallway, shooting Spike a meaningful look that he doesn't quite understand. Toothless sighs and stretches, toenails scraping against the wallpaper. Astrid turns through his door and sits on the end of the bed, grateful to take weight off of her feet and horribly nervous.

She hasn't been nervous to talk to Hiccup about something in years.

"So," he shuts the door behind him, tapping his foot on the ground for a nervous second, looking at her stomach not at all subtly. She crosses her arms and frowns at the ground. She should just tell him.

Tell him that she thought about him as a dad today. That she could see it clear as day and she doesn't know how to feel about it.

"Sit down," she snaps, scooting sideways to leave more room. "Iâ€do you want kids? Ever?" The words tumble out of her mouth before she can stop them, clumsy and impossible. Kids? She's asking about kids?

How old is she? Because she's never felt younger.

"Kids?" Hiccup blanches, walking to sit beside her, head cradled in his hands. "I don't know."

"Apparently Fishlegs wants three. Ruff thinks she wants two." She laughs, miserable and overwhelmed. "I haven't really thought about it."

"I haven't either," he admits, sitting up straight and dragging his palms down his cheeks. "Not specifically, I mean. I haveâ€I do want kids someday, I think."

"Yeah?"

"Someday," he nods slowly. "There's a lot of stuff that I want to do first, alright? A lot, a lot of stuff."

"Me too," she backs off of the topic, loathe to sound like she's dragging him into something. Because she's not. That blazing image of Hiccup holding a baby, sporting those finals week dark circles. "I'm justâ€It's a future thing, obviously. But you do want kids?"

"I guess I do," he laughs, looking a little insane, a little undone. Unraveling from the edges. "You?"

"Right, because I'm absolutely mother material," Astrid snorts, staring at the wall to avoid his face. A skinny arm loops over her shoulders and tugs her towards him, more warm and comforting than she could ever be.

"That doesn't really answer my question," his chin rests against the top of her head. "Do you _want_ kids?"

"I don't know." She sighs and leans into him, shoulder pressing against his ribs. "Someday? Maybe?"

"At least we're on the same page there," he laughs. "We're both clueless."

"I should have told you earlier," she nods, "I justâ€it was almost a joke, you know? It was 'maybe I didn't overeat, maybe I'm just _pregnant'_," the word catches in her throat, again embarrassingly frightening. "And then Ruff started asking if we'd had a condom incident, or something, and I realized that I'm a day off on my pill this month and Iâ€I panicked?" That might be the worst part, just how much she fell apart. Just how readily she signed herself over to the frenzy.

"Missing a day isn'tâ€that's not actually a big deal, is it? It'd be crazy if the tolerance was _that_ closeâ€" he hedges hopefully, hand

stiff on her shoulder.

"I don't think it is. I think we're alright, really." Astrid nudges him with her shoulder, trying to get closer as subtly as possible. "I justâ€" She can't think of anything else to say, the words all fickle and tactless against her tongue. "I think you'd be a great dad, for what it's worth," she admits, chewing on her lip.

"Come on, I'd be a disaster. If itâ€" he swallows hard at the possibility about to come out of his mouth. "If it were _our_ kid, it'd probably come out athletic and beautiful and we wouldn't have anything to talk about."

"If it were _our_ kid, I'm pretty sure Toothless would raise it."

"Its first word would be 'woof'," Hiccup snickers, kissing the top of her head.

"If it were a boy, he'd start lifting his leg." He snorts in agreement and she leans a little closer, feeling more forgiven.

"I think you'd be a great mom."

"You've thought about it?" She mutters, swinging a leg across his lap and turning to curl up leaning against him. He's smart enough not to mention it, instead wrapping steadying arms around her and holding her there. The brace digs into his thigh, stubbornly between them even now.

"Notâ€"If you're half as good at mommying them as you are at taking care of me, they'll be lucky kids."

The future tense is oddly comforting.

"I don't take care of you," she thinks back on the last few weeks and the incessant demands. She needed him to get her water and get her pills and help her to bed and take her freaking dog for a run.

"No one else makes sure I get sleep or feeds Toothless when I get busy," his grip tightens around her and she leans further into him, line of his collarbone against her temple. "And no one else always answers my calls. Always. I've called you at three in the morning before and you picked up. You were crankyâ€"|"

"Ok. So it sounds like I'd be a fine mom to some stubborn teenager, but a baby?" She shivers and he pulls her closer. "They're so tiny and fragile and I'm notâ€"|"I'm not good with fragile." Her knee throbs, reminding her just how much she hates its weakness and its horrible instability.

"I think you'd be great."

She's probably going to have kids with Hiccup someday, and one of them is going to say 'I told you so.' She sincerely hopes that it's him, as unlikely as that seems.

"One thing though," she laughs and leans back far enough to make eye contact. "My future child is not ending up with a nickname like _Hiccup_."

"Of course not, your future child isn't going to suffer in middle school," he snickers, lying back on the bed and taking her with him. She shifts to get comfortable, head on his shoulder as his hand curls around her waist.

"Would you want a boy or a girl?" She asks quietly, tucking her forehead to his neck and wrapping her bad leg across his hips as best she can. She scoots her hips closer to him, his side pressed tight against her front so that her brace is on the far side of him. It's the first time that the metal contraption has brought them closer together, and she silently tells it that it still has a long way to go.

"I don't know," he laughs, shifting a bit under her to get comfortable and letting his thumb stroke along the lower line of her ribs. "I haven't really thought about it. What about you?"

"I don'tâ€¦I think a boy would be easier, at least to start," she exhales slowly, breath hot against his neck. "No uphill battle against the princesses. And I see you being horrible to a daughter's first boyfriend."

"Really?" His chest puffs out underneath her as he smiles. "You're getting the protective vibe?"

"Come on, you have a pet wolf. And we both know you're going to have a garage full of machinery. It'll be even more terrifying than the whole 'cleaning your gun' act. Showing him some big grinding wheel, and the poor kid is terrifiedâ€¦"

"So, I want a daughter," he laughs and she thwacks his arm with the back of her hand. "What? I want to do the tough dad routine, that sounds like fun."

"You're an idiot," she laughs, curling a little closer to him, hand on his chest.

"I do want to have kids with _you _someday," he admits quietly, voice low and mellow. "If we're still together, I mean. But I think we will be. Maybe. If I don't say anything about cupcakes in the near futureâ€¦"

"Yeahâ€¦not mentioning cupcakes is probably a good move," she sighs heavily, propping herself onto an elbow and staring down at him. "I'llâ€¦I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I should have called you or something."

"I'll get my chance," he grins, and he looks too happy for her to be mad at the insinuation. She squirms a bit closer and his eyes drift down to the shirt gapping away from her chest.

"Does it really look ok?" She asks quietly, following his gaze and frowning at the change.

"It looksâ€¦_great_," he nods, hand smoothing around her side and sliding to cup the point of her hip. "Seriously."

"So good it made you act like a bumbling idiot?"

"Exactly. Take it as a compliment," his hand slips under her shirt, stroking the soft skin of her side as his face flushes at the different texture. He wonders just how insensitive it would be to try and get her shirt off now.

Probably pretty insensitiveâ€|but probably not as bad as _cupcakes_â€|

"I do look different," something in his eyes makes the room feel warmer, and she remembers her downstairs distraction. She wants him, she wants to feel absolutely normal and loved and to forget how scared she felt earlier.

"Good different," he insists, free hand sliding up the back of her neck to tug the hair tie out of her ponytail, smiling as it spills over her shoulder in a golden cascade. "Really," he combs his fingers through the strands as he starts to work her shirt up over hip.

"Oh?" She lays back down over him, fingers cupping his chin as she kisses him softly. "Because I think I need a little convincing,"

"Convincing?" He chuckles, palm sliding up between her shoulders, hot against her skin.

"So dense sometimes," she grins and sits up just long enough to pull her shirt over her head and squirm out of that impossibly tight sports bra. Hiccup grins and pulls her back onto him, hands greedily exploring the naked curve of her waist.

"I figured it'd be a couple of days," his hands dance up her spine, tickling her shoulders and holding those soft new lines close. He flushes, fingers clenching sweet and urgent on her shoulder blades, pulling her down to kiss him. "What with the whole cupcakes thingâ€|"

"I should have called," she frowns, nodding resolutely. "We're even."

"Fair enough," he laughs and glances down towards where she's pressed against him. "You're making it kind of hard for me to get naked, you know."

"Iâ€|" she tucks her head to his shoulder and sighs. "Give me a second."

"Are youâ€|" the question feels downright nonsensical in his mouth and he starts over, hands gentle on her back. "Are you _nervous_ right now?"

"No," she jerks her head up and glares at him for even suggesting it. Nervous? That's crazy. Why would she be nervous? He's seen her naked _hundreds_ of times. But not like this, not with this new strangeness making her feel heavy and slow. "Yes. I'm nervous."

His soft smile does very little to help the fluttering nausea in her stomach and she hides her forehead again in his shoulder, nose pressed against the side of his neck.

"I already told you that I liked it," he tries, turning sideways and planting a soft kiss against her temple. She burrows deeper into the dark, safe spot, legs lazily splaying on either side of his hips. "And you were the one taking your clothes off and talking about convincing. I've already seen it," he wraps his arms around her waist and holds her against him. "And it was nice. I saw it, and it was really nice."

"Fine," she sighs, because this is ridiculous, and his shoulder is too shallow to be a good hiding place anyway. "I'mâ€"I'm trusting you."

"Trustworthy," he assures her, eyes wandering as she rolls off of him back onto the bed. He attempts to follow, hand landing against her stomach, but she holds a finger in his direction, looking down at his annoyingly present clothes.

"Clothes. You've got to be naked too," she waits until he starts sliding his shirt up a milky white stomach before hooking her thumbs in the sides of her shorts and carefully pushing them down over her brace. He grins, crooked and boyish as he stands and pushes his pants down, hopping on one foot and unbuckling his leg.

"Bossy," he teases her, crawling back onto the bed and hovering over her. She has to give him credit for the eye contact.

"Whatever," she wraps arms around his neck and pulls him down to kiss him, nipping at his lip and slipping her tongue between his teeth. She can feel his smile against her, upturned lips almost tickling her cheeks as he takes over the kiss, hand pushing through her hair. His other fingers start to wander, tickling the outer point of her hip and tracing a line to her waist.

His lips wander down her neck, barely ghosting over her skin and tickling her again with that smile as she lets out an embarrassingly high pitched moan. The hand in her hair joins his grip on her waist, holding her as his hips nudge against hers. She'd be lying if she said that his already throbbing shaft isn't a self-confidence boost. Her hands drift to wind in his hair as he kisses further down, melting anxiousness with each gentle touch.

Finally, he dips his head and nibbles across that new, fuller rise of her breast and she moans, stretching carefree arms over her head.

"Less nervous?" He grins up at her, hands cupping her chest and breathing a bit harder as that inhuman urge reawakens in the back of his brain. She's justâ€"It's different but familiar, utterly irresistible in all of those Astrid ways he's used to on top of the appeal of all those new curves.

"You're teasing me," she complains, gasping as he sucks a pebbled nipple into his mouth with a too loud slurping sound.

"What do you expect, with all of this," he nuzzles against her chest, kissing softly and breathing almost unbearably hot air over her skin. "It'sâ€" he trails off distracted, rocking his hips against hers and giving her other breast much deserved attention.

"Mmmmâ€" she hums happily, tugging at the ends of his hair and

relaxing into the bed.

"Seriously, Astrid," he gasps, grabbing her hip and grinding a bit harder against her, teasing with that heat against her core. "You look amazing," he swipes a thumb across her breast, mouthing at her pulse point and sighing as she slings her good leg over his ass, pinning him against her.

"Canâ€¦" she starts to ask something but loses her train of thought when his hand slides down the back of her thigh and grabs her ass. He groans into her neck, and it sends electric pulses shooting through her, scalding fingers stroking at the warmth in the pit of her stomach. "Roll over."

"Huhâ€"ack!" He grips tight to the edge of the bed as she flips him, wincing as the motion pulls at her knee. Luckily, the way that they landed, she can let the brace hang off of the side of the bed, toes brushing the floor as she raises herself on her good knee and positions herself over his hips. Her hand wraps around his shaft and pumps slowly, pressing him against her and preparing to sit. His eyes widen and he jerks halfway to sitting. "Wait!"

"What?" She glares at him, "they'll still be there later." She gestures to her chest, and feeling exposed isn't anything to be nervous about.

"Ummâ€¦condom?" Her eyes widen and she jumps back a few inches, feeling beyond idiotic.

"Right. Condom. Where are they?"

"Bedside table? I think there are some in there," Hiccup looks towards the small drawer and Astrid hops onto her bad foot, carefully crawling off of him and taking a slow careful step to the table. Because it's convenient, he reaches out and pinches her butt, grinning when she squeaks and glares back over her shoulder at him. "It was right there."

"And here we go," she ignores his explanation, retrieving an almost embarrassingly dusty foil wrapper from the back of the drawer and ripping it open. "Thanks for reminding me," her smile is sheepish as she slides the rubber onto him, wiping the sticky lube on her side and climbing back into position.

"No problem," his thumb finds her clit, flicking gently across it as she lines him up again and sits with a moan. Her toes brace against the floor as she leans down to kiss him, hips rocking forward against him.

It's less intimate, admittedly, with the barrier between them, but it doesn't change the way that he strokes so sweetly against that spot deep inside her with every twitching rock of his hips. She plants her hands against his shoulders and leans up slightly, biting her lip as the angle deepens and he grabs her hips, pulling her down firmly against him.

"Right there," she nods, fingers digging into the points of his shoulders as her movements find a quickening rhythm. He can almost feel her, his brain filling in the wet walls so soft and welcoming as they grip him. It's almost enough and he sits up, short leg dangling

over the side of the bed under hers as his arms wrap around her waist, tugging her close to bury his face in her neck. "This isâ€|thatâ€|thereâ€|" she tries to talk, giving up as he dips his head to suck on a pebbled nipple, dragging her closer to him.

It seems like far too soon when she tenses, eyes rolling back into her head as her hips twitch frantically on his.

"Alright?" He checks, rubbing the boneless thigh above her brace and she nods, loose and happy in his arms.

"Good," she looks at him, leg sliding from beside them to curl around his back. "You didn't?" Her eyes fall to where they're still joined and he shakes his head.

"It'sâ€|harder with theâ€|yeah," he says almost apologetically, kissing her sweat damp forehead.

"What do you need?" She asks, hand hooking behind his neck and kissing him, prying his lips apart and invading his mouth with an eager tongue.

"I'm not complainingâ€|" kiss, "about this," he reaches down to grab her rear, hips grinding up into her.

"This?" She checks, kissing him again, groaning into his mouth as he starts to move her up and down on top of him.

"Yeah," he nods, head tipped back as she starts nibbling along the column of his neck, eyes squinting shut. Astrid takes over some of the rocking, anchoring her arms around his shoulders and sliding alongside him, mouth dancing across his upper chest. "Astridâ€|" he moans her name and it's an electric shock through her body.

Her hand slips between them, grinding down on her clit as they start to rock together faster, collision slippery and almost enough, with her warm fingers glancing across his base on every stroke. He can feel that she's going to follow him again, from the warmth again building within her, clenching frantically around him as she starts to moan, forehead resting against his shoulder.

"Ohâ€|"oh _god_, " she groans, back stiffening as her fingers press hard into her clit, sending her over that edge. Hiccup follows, pulling her hips down and holding her there as she twitches. "That wasâ€|"you really last longer with a condom, don't you?"

"And thanks for _that_ confidence boost," he laughs, arms falling slack around her.

"Love you," she kisses his cheek, more tender than words would be and looks down at her braced leg tangled in his short one. "Now how do we get out of this?"

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**And the smut. Way to talk yourself out of trouble there Hiccup. Props. **

**Good luck to everyone surviving finals, and chapter 12 will be out on Wednesday. **

****Also, does anyone have a strong opinion on this update schedule? Because I'm thinking about posting everyday starting next Thursday or Friday just to get this thing done with, because otherwise it's trying to go into June, which I don't want. So let me know if that sounds alright. ****

****Also let me know if the smut was alright, I did not have as much time with it as I'm used to, so I hope it's still ok. ****

12. Chapter 12

****Buckle your seatbelts. Shenanigans ahead. ****

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Miss Hofferson,

First off, we are sorry to hear about your knee injury. We are also sorry to report that we've found someone else for the advertising campaign that was posed to you in Buenos Aires.

However, despite your current slowed condition, we believe that we might have a proposition geared towards your talents. We have an advertising representative currently in Boulder, and he has expressed interest in speaking with you sometime next week. He has been copied on this e-mail and is eagerly awaiting a response.

Good luck,

Charles Smith â€" Level 2 Advertising Representative

Astrid stares at the e-mail, brief but definitive, and grins, reaching down and scratching Spike's ears. The pit smiles at the attention, panting and licking her owner's calf below the restricting brace.

She turns back to her computer and types a quick reply to the preferred e-mail address, reading it twice for errors and hitting send. This might still happen?

Yes, it might still happen. Miraculously, against all odds.

"Hiccup!" She calls, lurching to her feet at his silence and half skipping down the hallway to his bedroom, where he's been hiding with his homework all night. She knocks on the door, waiting momentarily for a response before opening the door and peeking in, barely polite enough not to barge in entirely.

Toothless raises his head from his post curled near the foot of the bed and smiles, thumping a wiry haired tail against the sheets and turning slightly to expose his chest for attention. Hiccup is asleep, face pressed into a massive and miserable looking textbook as he snores into the pages, hair charged with static and sticking stubbornly vertical. Astrid softens, slipping inside and offering Toothless the open door with a quirked brow.

The wolf thinks on it for a second and accepts the offer, climbing

off of the bed with a long, slow stretch, and pausing to give her knee a caring lick on the way out into the hallway where Spike greets him with a wag and a smile. Closing the door behind her, Astrid flicks the overhead light off and crosses the room quietly and aggravatingly slowly, carefully tugging Hiccup's impromptu literary pillow from under his face and tucking his homework into it as a bookmark. He grumbles and curls up further on his side, metal foot dragging across the sheets with a rasp that almost sounds like ripping and Astrid sighs, stepping forward and pushing the hem of his pants up far enough to get at the straps of his prosthetic, releasing it with practiced fingers and setting it on the ground next to that bulging textbook.

She perches on the edge of the bed, hand hovering over the sliver of exposed skin between his sleep-twisted tee-shirt and the leather line of his belt, contemplating waking him up. If he fell asleep like this, he obviously needs it, and she wonders just how much sleep her neediness has cost him over the past few weeks. She knows from years of his grueling college experience that three am is his good friend and near daily companion, and that's when he doesn't have someone else to take care of.

Also, if yesterday's activitiesâ€|she blushes at the memory of his absolutely gob-smacked face as he cataloged every change in each inch of her skin with carefully firm handsâ€|

She definitely didn't help him get any sleep last night.

And now she's thinking about moving forward.

If his reaction to her riding the exercise bike was any indication of his opinion towards her running moreâ€|she's worried about this deal coming so soon after her injury. He was the one to suggest it, but she's sure that he meant something more along the lines of using the already recorded footage with the contract that she'd already been offered. That's what she thought too, but if this is requiring a meeting and a none too subtle acknowledgement of her injury, then this is probably more extensive and work intensive.

She's realizing that she's probably going to have to run. And she's probably going to have to start learning how to again sooner rather than later.

Hiccup is going to hate that. So far, he's dragged her through all of these lazy slumps with just enough gentle pressure, just enough spur in her sides to get her over and through one at a time. She thinks about all those little hurdles in her future. Walking longer distances without the crutch. Getting rid of this horrible, leaning new limp.

Jogging. Running. Jumping.

She's not going to take them one at a time anymore, is she? It's going to be all at once, simultaneous and absolute. She's got to show up to that meeting next week without a limp, without a crutch.

She's got to look like a true prospect, and not a charity case.

Hiccup lets loose a chainsaw snore, drooling against the comforter

and rolling onto his back, eyebrows furrowed even in dream land and Astrid sets a gentle palm on his thigh, thumb stroking over his pulse point as she bites her lip. This has been harder on him than she'd imagined. Too many late nights in his already rough schedule, too much carrying her around and tending to her while she's needed more than she should have ever had to ask for.

She's walking now, even if it's not particularly well, or particularly quickly. As much as she loves seeing him every day, it's obviously more effort than he has for her right now. It's been changing since Sophomore year, since she was done with science and consumed with interesting classes while his curriculum got more banal and further from what he wanted to do. Somehow, no matter how much she ran or wrote or tried, he was always sleeping less and stretched thinner, dozing off against her shoulder when she came home for the weekend and sleeping past noon every chance he got.

He loves what he's doing, nothing gets him more excited than a long productive day at his internship, where something started working like it should. But she hates seeing him soâ€|done, so tired. He never seems to catch a break, what with the tests every other week and Spike and Toothless and the never ending homework andâ€|and she's been making it worse for almost three weeks now.

She leans down and kisses his forehead, her hair tickling along his jaw and waking him. He smiles in the diffuse light filtering through the blinds, sleepy hand finding the small of her back, solid and impossibly warm against her.

"You fell asleep doing homework," she tells him quietly, lips ghosting over his cheek, impossibly fond and seeping silent apology. "Go back to sleep."

"Shit," he groans, pushing up onto his elbows and wiping his eyes, blinking and trying to deposit sharp lines to the blurry space around him. "I had to get that done."

"It's only five thirty," she tells him, nudging his shoulder with a practice gentled hand. "Finish your nap, I'll wake you up in a few hours."

"You don't have to do that," he insists, low voice slightly slurred as he lays back down, shifting to get comfortable and wrapping long fingers around her waist.

"It's not a massive favor," she laughs, stroking a thumb over the wrinkled and twisted sleeve of his shirt. "Just take a couple of hours to sleep." She can see deep shadowed pits under his eyes that have somehow flown under the radar until this second and frowns, "you look like you need it."

"Thanks," he snarks, eyes falling fully shut. His fingers stroke against her side through her shirt, warm and lulling. "At least stay. We'll set an alarm."

And it's so tempting. So many long nights, cold and half asleep in her own too big bed, resenting all of those awkwardly placed pillows keeping her knee up and her sleeping solo. She wants nothing more in the moment than to curl up next to him, bad leg elevated across his hips, head on his shoulder. It's always been shockingly comfortable,

no matter how bony he was, and his hand is so sweetly warm, his chest must be a concentration of that saccharine balminess.

"Okâ€|" she gives in, biting her lip and standing cautiously, grabbing her phone out of her gym shorts pocket and kissing his forehead again. "I've just got to make a call, but I'll be right back."

"Who are you calling?" He pouts, fingers clenching in the fabric at the side of her shirt and attempting to drag her back down.

"Ruff," she rolls her eyes and reaches down, prying his hand away from her and backing away from the bed. "Just a couple minutes." He nods grudgingly and she slips out into the hallway, shutting the door behind her and dialing Ruff's number. Her friend picks up on the second ring with a gruff greeting and Astrid exhales before speaking. "Hey, so I need to come back."

"Yeah?" Ruff asks, and Astrid can hear her wolfish smile through the phone. "Got bored of sexy gimp?"

"Noâ€|Nike wants to meet with me next week."

"No shit?" Ruff pounds on something excitedly on the other end of the line. "That's fantastic. How soon can you be up and running again?"

"As soon as possible," Astrid nods grimly at the wall, thinking of her future and Hiccup and Spike, and everything that needs her to run. "I'm already on a stationary bikeâ€|so just give me a couple of weeks."

"Will Nike give you a couple of weeks?" Ruff voices Astrid's inner concerns, callus and almost bored with the monumental prospect. She's right, Astrid needs to be running whenever Nike tells her to be running.

This is possible, and all that's between her and familiar solidity is one impressive meeting with some executive, and lots of hard work. If she's good at anything, it's working impressively hard.

She can do this.

"I'll learn when I meet with them. But I need to get going again."

"Good," Ruff is smiling now, genuine and clear, free of all that destructive glee. "It's good to hear you talking like this."

"Can you pick me up on Sunday?" She asks, potential welling above that horrible fact that she's going to miss being home. "I'm going to need the training center."

"Sunday? If you feed me dinner, I'll pick you up anytime," Ruff laughs, and for the first time in weeks, all this potential feels absolutely real.

"I'll have pizza here at six. I can't guarantee I'll save you any thoughâ€|"

"Right-o fatty, it must be even harder to get a bite in edgewise now."

"Not for long," Astrid grins, brushing off the friendly insult. "So Sunday at six?"

"See you then," Ruff pauses for a second. "And I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks," they say bye one more time before hanging up. Astrid pauses in the hallway and sets an alarm for eight o'clock before sneaking back into Hiccup's bedroom, leaving the door cracked open for any interested dogs and crossing the room in three slow but purposefully even steps.

When she manages a comfortable position beside him, and his snoring disrupts long enough to kiss the top of her hair, it feels like everything might actually be ok for the first concrete instance in weeks.

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The funny thing is, Astrid thought she'd be deeply excited to share her news with Hiccup as soon as he woke up, but something snatched her tongue. It's Friday, and while she'd say that her imminent departure isn't exactly a secret, Hiccup isn't exactly up to date on the situation either. For some incomprehensible reason, the thought of telling him that she's going back to Boulder with intent to train on Sunday awakens something festering and obnoxious in her gut.

He won't like the idea, and she doesn't want to think that he has reason.

It's mid-afternoon on Friday, and Astrid has finally convinced Hiccup to take an afternoon off from nurse duty to visit the shelter that he's obviously starting to miss. She's curled on the couch watching Iron Chef, pretending to edit her latest essay that doesn't seem to get any better with each additional pass when the knock on the front door sends the dogs into a barking tizzy. After sighing and heaving herself off of the couch with an almost embarrassing grunt, Astrid limps through the house and peers through the peephole.

Robert Thuggory is making an immensely stupid face at Spike through the front door's side panel.

Astrid looks down, trying to decide if it's immensely obvious that her sports bra is dangerously tight and creating cleavage she'd only stupidly dreamt of before. It's not obvious through her shirt and she opens the door, stepping to the side to let Toothless and an especially eager Spike rush the young man and say hello with flapping tongues and frantically wagging tails.

Spike jumps up enthusiastically, planting her paws on Thuggory's stomach and wagging so hard it could be confused for a seizure. It's hard to feel anything bad towards someone that makes Spike this happy just by showing up.

"Hey Thugs," Astrid greets, patting her good leg to summon the dogs back inside. "Hiccup isn't here right now, he's volunteering at the animal shelter."

"Oh, he's still liking that, is he?"

"I think he's starting to like the cats a little too much," she shakes her head, "and if he comes home with one of those hairballs, I'm letting Spike eat it." Thuggory laughs at that, bending down to pet the pit's smiling head.

"I'm not a cat person myself," he assures and Astrid agrees with an animated grimace.

"Does Hiccup know you were dropping by?"

"Yeah, we've got some homework to get done tonight," he shakes his head mournfully and Astrid can't help but grin at his affinity for theatrics. "Don't tell him that I said this, but he's a genius."

"Your secret is safe," she takes a careful step away from the middle of the doorway, welcoming him inside with a casual wave. "He should be home anytime." It's impossible not to be wildly self-conscious as she limps away from the door, but it's surprisingly easy to fake pride with rigid shoulders and a stiff upper lip.

"You're moving a little slower than the last time I saw you," he comments, perpetually genial, and Astrid scowls at the wall in front of them, wishing that he'd walk at a normal speed and not worry about politely trailing her.

"So observant," she compliments with sarcastically raised eyebrows.

"Yeah, and you've been spending too much time with Henry."

"Oh, how could you tell?" She snips, gesturing to her brace, "our matching hardware?" Thuggory shakes his head at that too familiar tone.

"As if one Henry weren't enough for the _state_."

"Is it really that bad?" Astrid asks with a grin, happy to flop back onto the couch and rest her bad heel on the coffee table.

"Yeah, you might want to get out more," he suggests with a wary nod and Astrid laughs. Thuggory is Hiccup's consummate school friend, the homework compatriot and project partner, but the two boys seem to have gotten closer than that over the past few years. Astrid is just glad that she's always been able to talk to Thuggory, rather than struggling through conversation with some over-her-head nerdy type that Hiccup could have just as easily brought home.

Not to mention that the droves of Scott Nout-esque charm that makes the conversation sailing familiar waters.

"I've got a few more weeks with this thing sixteen to eighteen hours a day," she pats her encased knee, a frown slipping under her jovial tone. "Getting out isn't exactly part of the program."

Not to mention that she's saving her energy to strut into that Nike meeting, feigning perfection before the real work begins.

"Then what?" Thuggory asks, and it's very clearly one of those jock questions, revolving in a jock circle where it's ok to bring up ice baths and tape like normal people talk about the weather. She glances down at his Mines Rugby shirt and frowns.

"I hope I'm jogging," she nods resolutely, crossing out the fickle hope in her mind and wondering when she'll be able to say it with certainty to anyone but the ever-supportive Ruff. "And thenâ€¦I'll see where my prospects lie."

Would it feel better to tell Thuggory about Nike? Would the secret cease to be a dramatic weight on her chest, forcing her to hold her breath when all she wants to do is taste the refreshing possibility?

Probably not. She'd most likely just feel horrible for telling someone else before Hiccup.

"My sister blew her knee in a soccer game in her second high school season," Thuggory contributes with a sympathetic nod, and Astrid resists the urge to turn up the volume on the TV and drown him out.

"Is she ok?" Did she have any sort of career after that? Did she want one? Was she walking in a week, or did it take her two?

"She was back on the team Junior and Senior year," he shrugs. "But I don't think she wanted to play in college anyway."

It's a falsely happy ending, and Astrid smiles in convoluted thanks anyway. She wanted to hear some insipid sports movie summary where the down and out underdog came back against all odds and led a ragged group of dreamers to gold.

Or that she healed to be as strong as she was before.

It's amazing how little constitutes a fairy tale these days.

"It was my last season anyway," she reminds herself, making a mental note to tell Hiccup tonight, so that all of this can cease to be some looming secret. Something bad she's decided and just hasn't followed through with yet.

"Plus, pretty girl like you, it's not like you're going to have problems getting a job." Astrid arches an eyebrow at the sideways compliment, feeling anything but pretty with her old tee-shirt and immensely sloppy braid.

"Me being pretty," she spits the word, "has nothing to do with it. I'm graduating Magna cum Laude."

"But I mean, looking like you do isn't going to make things more difficult for you," he grins, that Thuggory default. Astrid rolls her eyes and turns up the television volume.

"You forget, Thugs, I'm not going to be grading anything of yours anytime soon, so you can lay off the charm."

"I'm just pointing out that your face perfectly exemplifies the

Golden ratio" "

"Oh good, nerdy flirting, let me try," she grins and leans towards him. "Your face perfectly exemplifies a giant douchebag."

"Oh, I see how it is," he sits back with an almost competitive grin in the easy chair, and it sparks that too long abandoned craving for rivalry within Astrid. "Your eyes are opalescent," he comments in a smooth tone so impossibly far from the nasal that actually works.

"Your eyes are a plain shade of brown."

"The ladies call it sullen ochre," he prattles indignantly.

"The ladies sound like idiots."

"Well they aren't half as smart as you are," he compliments and she mimes a slow clap before falling stony and shaking her head.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" He asks, aghast at his one true talent being cheated the respect that it deserves. "I'd like to get to know you better," he tries with a soft but empty smile.

She likes gapped teeth and lofty promises and the occasional stammer.

"You do know me," Astrid rolls her eyes and turns back to the TV. "And you're distracting me from Iron Chef."

"So you admit that you're drawn to me," he calls her out, some strange mix of casa nova and Hiccup's friend who she has personally seen down an entire family-sized bag of Cheetos in one sitting.

"I do keep glancing over," she lets her voice drop and Thuggory grins at his anticipated victory, "to see if you're still a bonehead."

"You aren't charmed at all, are you?" He asks incredulously. "I'm stepping out my best material here, and you are unaffected."

"Your best material just isn't every good," Astrid laughs.

"Hotter girls have fallen for that!" He insists, before his tone levels again. "But none of them had the inner beauty that I see in you."

"Oh God, where'd you find that one?" She downright guffaws, gasping solidly for lost breath.

"You're a freak!" He claims too loudly and Spike jumps halfway into his lap in attempted comfort.

"Only for Hiccup," she reminds him with a cheeky grin.

"How did he get you anyway?" Thuggory shakes his head. "Do you just go for that whole 'I only have one leg and understand spring

constants' thing?" He gestures wildly and puts on a nasal accent.

"Is that supposed to sound like Hiccup? Because it's way more likeâ€"

"Erâ€|what's going on?" Hiccup asks from the doorway, frowning and holding his backpack against his shoulder with a single strap.

"Your girlfriend is a freak of nature, man!" Thuggory excitedly jumps to his feet, an anxious Spike dancing around his heels. "She doesn't find me charming at all."

"Why were you trying to charm my girlfriend?" Hiccup asks, obviously more baffled than annoyed, and Thuggory shrugs, stepping closer to his friend and whispering too loudly.

"She seemed kind of down, and I doubted anyone else was fulfilling thatâ€"

"Are you insinuating that Hiccup isn't fulfilling?" Astrid lurches to one steady foot, hopping towards the boys in the most intimidating way possible.

It's not incredibly intimidating.

"I'm just saying that being doctored probably doesn't soothe that feminine side."

"Women love doctors! We want to do doctors!" She retorts, fired up and alarmingly geared to _win_. "And you just aren't charming. That's why I'm not charmed."

"But Henry is charming?" Thuggory gestures to his friend and Hiccup rolls his eyes.

"And the gesturingâ€|"

"Hiccup is crazily charming. Insanely charming." Astrid insists, hopping closer and jabbing a finger into Thuggory's chest. "I'll bet he can charm way more girls than you can," she proposes, offering her hand. Thuggory grabs it and shakes, gripping entirely too hard. Astrid returns the excessive pressure with far too much glee and he squeaks.

"You're so on," he taunts, rubbing his palms together menacingly.

"Does anyone care that I really don't want to do this?" Hiccup asks, receiving no verbal answer as Astrid snatches his hand and starts dragging him towards the garage with slow but surprisingly forceful steps, glaring at Thuggory the entire way. "Guess notâ€|Thuggory, we have toâ€|and you don't care either. Great."

Twenty minutes later, they're in the parking lot of the downtown Golden bar that Thuggory frequents. Astrid sits in the passenger seat while Hiccup drives, palm on his knee and spouting advice.

"Buy her a drink, but don't be forceful, just offerâ€|tell her you like her shoes, it means you aren't staring down her shirt. We're

going for nice guy here, ok?" Astrid asks to make sure that he's still listening to her diatribe.

Thuggory is impatiently kicking the back of her seat like a six year old who knows just how badly he's about to lose.

"I am a nice guy."

"That's why this plan is genius," she pats his leg bracingly. "You've got this," and she yanks him in by the back of his neck, planting an anything but gentle kiss on his lips before pulling back and looking him dead in the eye. "For luck."

"You're going to regret this Astrid!" Thuggory taunts and Astrid sticks her tongue out at him like the adult that she is.

As soon as they disappear into the bar, and her heart clenches fitfully at the mental image of Hiccup in the bar swarmed by a throng of beautiful women, she realizes what a horrible idea this is.

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"Just how much will I regret it if I stand by the door and avoid eye contact with everyone until I can leave?" Hiccup asks his friend, already uncomfortable in the noisy, crowded building.

"You'll never hear the end of it from me, and neither will Astrid." Everything about Thuggory's mischievous face is overwhelmingly honest.

"And then I'll never hear the end of it from Astrid either," Hiccup nods curtly, annoyance welling under his trepidation as he reluctantly pulls his hands out of his pockets, thumbing the folded twenty that Astrid slipped him in the car.

His girlfriend is giving him money to flirt with girls, and he's never felt more like he's walking into some elaborately orchestrated trap.

"Good luck," Thuggory flashes Hiccup his winningest grin and saunters off towards the bar.

Hiccup makes a mental note to get some friends without competitive sides so large they're gravitationally significant.

He approaches the bar, half tempted to order a very strong drink for himself and call it a night, but he doubts Thuggory is staying sober and it's not exactly like he can trust Astrid to drive them home without her brace getting stuck on the steering wheel and sending them careening into a ditch.

He's never picked up a girl before, there was no need to keep searching once there was Astrid, and it's not like his searching ever got off of the ground in the first place. And he doubts anyone in here will be miraculously charmed by Star Trek like he somehow managed unintentionally with Heather. This is truly useless, isn't it?

Astrid should be happy to have a boyfriend with absolutely no

game.

A woman in her mid-twenties sidles up to the bar beside him and he scoots over to leave more room. She smiles in thanks before staring searchingly towards the end of the bar, looking for the bartender. Hiccup follows her gaze, again fiddling with his handful of Astrid's dirty pride money before leaning forward against the din and trying to get the woman's attention.

"Er, can I buy you a drink?" He asks and she glances at him with half-speed double take.

"Did you say something?" She almost shouts and Hiccup clears his throat to try again.

"Can I buy you a drink?" He repeats more loudly and her eyes flit down briefly before she smiles wider.

"Sure, I'm Bridget," she offers, twirling a long sandy brown curl around her finger.

"I'm Henry-Oh!" He calls to the passing bartender and the man looks at him expectantly. "Whatever the lady wants," he gestures to Bridget, who's blushing at being called a lady so casually.

"Hmm...I'll have a Sex on the Beach," she orders with a flushed grin and Hiccup swallows that stubborn stutter that won't stop asking him what the hell he's doing. He shakes his head and hands the bartender the money with an overwhelmingly awkward smile. "You aren't going to get anything?" Bridget asks after the bartender has disappeared and Hiccup shrugs.

"Designated driver." The conversation lulls and Bridget shifts nervously back onto her heels, alternating between staring at him and looking aimlessly around the room. "I like your shoes," he quotes Astrid's advice verbatim, and Bridget's eyes light up.

He's pretty sure that he's not getting out of this without Astrid wanting to kill him.

"Thank you! They're new," she twists a foot slightly and shows him the side. He's again at an absolute loss for words. He glances around, looking for anything of interest and wondering what he'll do if he spies something before the returning bartender catches his eye.

"Hey, it's your drink," he grins a little too much at the distraction, accepting his change and handing the tall, fruity drink to the woman.

They stare at each other and Hiccup finds himself wishing that he were out in the car. At least Astrid is there and the music isn't attempting to drill into his brain.

"Thank you...Henry, is it?" She double checks that she has the right name and he nods. "I'mâ€¦" A look over her shoulder. She bites her lip and frowns, once again looking a little too hard at Hiccup. "I'm actually here with a bachelorette party, so I have to goâ€¦" she smiles a little too openly and Hiccup is reassured that Astrid could

not have possibly guessed what she was asking-no telling-him to do.
"But hey, why don't you come sit with us?"

She doesn't wait for an answer, grabbing his wrist and starting to lead him away from the bar. He shakes his head furiously, because Astrid said absolutely nothing about dens of depravity or bachelorette parties.

"No, I really couldn't intrude-"

"It's not an intrusion!" She insists, waving to a group of women in a booth now visible through the fringes of the crowd.. One gives a thumbs up back and Bridget turns to look back at Hiccup almost pleadingly.

He doesn't remember the last time he was this uncomfortable.

"I really couldn't."

"Oh! The bride wants to meet you," Bridget smiles and waves enthusiastically to an obviously drunk woman wearing a small pink dress and a plastic tiara. "You can't say no to that!"

"Er...I can't?"

"No! Come on!" And he somehow ends up seated between Bridget, who for some reason gets the wonderfully lonely end seat of the round booth, and a girl drinking something neon colored and sweet smelling that she proudly claims is called a Screaming Orgasm. Hiccup wishes Astrid were here to beat whatever bartender named these things within an inch of their lives.

He wishes Astrid were here to glare at all the women staring at him, to kiss him fiercely and hold his hand like he's worth keeping.

She's not here though. She sent him in here without her.

"So your name is Henry?" A woman asks from across the table, and Hiccup tries his absolute best not to let his eyes dive into that absolutely astounding feast of cleavage. "That's a hot name."

"Ummâ€¦" he swallows a stutter. "Ok."

"It's like king Henry in the Tudors!" The bride realizes with a delighted squeal that makes the hairs on the back of Hiccup's neck stand on end. "The hot one with all the wives."

All the wives that he had killed.

That _hot _one.

"You're going to be a wife!" One of the women crows, lifting her glass above her head and drunkenly sloshing overpriced alcohol onto the floor.

"I'm getting married tomorrow!" The bride yells, standing up and chugging the rest of her very pink and very strong drink back like it's water. She turns to Hiccup and grins, intoxicated with her hair

sticking out from her tiara at odd angles. "And I was getting disappointed because there weren't any super hot guys at this bar. But then Bridget brings one over just for _me_!" She raises her empty glass towards Bridget, who suddenly looks less than comfortable with that whole idea.

"Well, he did buy _me_ a drink," she defends with a passive aggressive shrug.

"But it's my party."

Hiccup wonders just how much this grown woman had to make her act like a four year old, or if she's just always like this. She flips her hair cattily over her shoulder and Hiccup guesses the latter with confidence.

"But Ally-" Bridget starts, only to be cut off by the bride continuing, full of reeking bravado.

"Who here thinks that I should give Henry a little fun to celebrate still being single?" Ally crows and Hiccup takes a moment to pity whatever poor man is marrying this woman before the fear sets in.

"I don't want any fun, I hate fun," he interjects, but no one besides an obviously fretting Bridget seems to hear him.

"Come on Bridget, trade seats with him," Ally looms over her friend from the end of the booth.

"He doesn't want to-"

"You know, your sister was just telling me yesterday how much she wanted to be a bridesmaid."

"Alright," Bridget scowls, looking hopefully at Hiccup before half standing and sliding over his lap, entirely too close. He blushes and flees to the edge of the seat, pointedly avoiding eye contact with the less than sane bride to be.

"Come on Henry," she urges him, starting to shake her hips far too seductively considering she's not marrying _him_.

"I'm _really_ good-"

"Henry!" The welcomed cry flies over Hiccup's shoulder and he whirls to see Thuggory standing with his arms crossed, a picture perfect sore loser.

Hiccup has never been so happy to see his friend before in his life.

"Excuse me, this is a private party," the cleavage on the other side of the table says snootily.

"Henry, how could you do this?" Thuggory continues, apparently ignoring the obvious dismissal.

"I'm just doing what Astrid told me to," Hiccup defends, confused by his friend's hurt tone. "Admittedly, it got a little out of control." He leans away from the downright aggressive woman in front of him,

shooting Thuggory a distressed look.

"Astrid doesn't know _us_, Henry," Thuggory scowls, and Hiccup really didn't realize how seriously his friend was taking this bet. "How could you do this to me?" He rests a hand over his chest, ever theatrical. "How could you do this to us?"

"Er...what?" Hiccup blanks.

"I'll be in the car if you decide this relationship is worth saving."

"Thuggory!" Hiccup calls out as his friend bizarrely turns to abandon him. All the women at the table are staring at him like he sprouted a second head.

"He did...he did say that he liked my shoes," Bridget mutters, looking shocked and more than a little disappointed.

"Have you ever even been with a woman?" Cleavage asks, leaning forward and twirling her hair around her finger.

"It was nice to meet you," Hiccup stands, carefully sliding against the side of the booth so as not to touch the still looming almost bride. "But I've umm...I've got to go," he turns to exit with what's left of his pride but Bridget grabs his hands and digs in her purse, producing a pen.

"Call me if you ever switch teams," she scrawls her phone number on his hand and embarrassingly encircles it in a heart.

"Okâ€|" he stands awkwardly still until she lets go of his hand, then he's out the door into the refreshingly cool and silent night air.

Astrid and Thuggory are in the car, heads hunched close to each other, talking urgently. They shake hands earnestly and when Astrid turns and sees him, her eyes light up like it's been months. As soon as he's in the car, she kisses him, shoving her tongue eagerly into his mouthing and holding tight to the back of his neck like he's trying to escape.

Because Thuggory is in the car, and he is still working out how he feels about this whole situation, he tries to pull away, but she slides her spare hand down the back of his jeans and gropes, moaning against his tongue. And he remembers just how tight her bra is under her thin shirt, clamping down on all that still new fullness. His hand finds her waist and he kisses her back, nearly dragging her across the center console towards him.

"I would like to get to that homework at some point," Thuggory announces from the backseat, embarrassed face clashing with Astrid's somehow relieved grin. She and Thuggory share a subtle look that he doesn't understand before Astrid readjusts her seat and buckles her seatbelt. Hiccup shifts the car into drive and her eyes widen, staring at his fingers like they're strangling her.

"What's on your hand?"

"A phone number," Hiccup tells her flatly, remembering why he's

annoyed, no matter how nice it is to be greeted by earnest, excited lips.

"Whose phone number?" He looks at his hand and reads the bubbly letters, despite the fact that he remembers the name perfectly, branded in an aura of embarrassment on his brain.

"Bridget's."

"Come on, dude," Thuggory steps in, looking nervously at Astrid and leaning between the two over divide in the seats. "Homework. I have an eight o'clock tomorrow."

"I'm getting new friends," Hiccup chastises, rolling his eyes in Thuggory's general direction and pulling out of the parking lot.

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**Yes. I love this chapter, so freaking much. I was cackling alone the whole time I was writing this, I want Thuggory and Ruff in my brain all of the time. **

**Please tell me what you thought of the hilarity, because I need to hear what you guys thought of Thuggory's awesome flirting attempts, and Hiccup's terrifying flirting attempts. **

**And Astrid's sad, lonely competitive streak. Oh, and of course all of those plot thingies with Nike and what not. I'd love to hear about those too. **

**Next chapter will be out on Friday, as I am switching to every other day updates to speed this thing up and get it out before June!
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13. Chapter 13

And you thought last time was longâ€¦

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Astrid drops the tray on her bedside table and flops back onto her bed indignantly, slightly soothed when both Spike and Toothless climb up beside her and curl comfortably on either side of her waist. She glares one last time at the closed door across the hallway, as if an angry stare would pry it open. After a moment of trying to mentally set the wood on fire, her phone finds its way into her hand and she dials Ruff, only realizing that she's huffing rather loudly to herself when she holds the phone to her ear and the static echos in her own deadened speaker.

"Hello?" Ruff picks up, unusually chipper, and Astrid almost regrets the tirade that might be about to worsen her best friend's day.

"Hiccup's door is locked," she starts, immediately feeling more than a little insane and backtracking. "Actually, I was trying to bring him breakfast, and when I knocked on his door he got up and

locked it."

There. Now her indignation is properly explained.

"Maybe he was watching something weird," Ruff suggests with a chuckle and Astrid rolls her eyes, refusing to cool off.

"I don't care," she scowls at the ceiling, wrapping a possessive arm around Toothless's neck and letting him lick the underside of her chin with a warm syrupy tongue. "He's...he's never literally locked me out before."

"What if he's busy?"

"He'd still want breakfast."

"What if he already ate?" Ruff checks, and Astrid is sure that at this point her friend is just messing with her.

"He hasn't been to the kitchen. The only time I've seen him this morning was when he let Toothless out and asked me to feed him." Astrid frowns. "You know, in hindsight that 'thank you' is sounding a lot more like sarcasm."

"It was probably sarcasm," Ruff affirms. "Have you told him that you're coming back up tomorrow?"

"No," Astrid grumbles guiltily. "Why do you always turn this stuff around on me?"

"It calms you down," Ruff answers, and Astrid can practically hear her shrug.

"And I thought he'd be downright chipper after last night," Astrid glowers, that horrible jealousy bubbling in her chest.

"What happened last night?" Ruff asks, interest piqued by Astrid's dark tone. She sets down whatever she was doing with a click and Astrid sighs.

"Nothing...Just a stupid bet with Thuggory."

"That's the engineer guy who dribbles Scott, right?" Ruff checks and Astrid barks out a humorless laugh at that first meeting.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"So were you betting on how far Hiccup could get one-legged or something? Because even my devious mind can't come up with anything that you could bet about that would infuriate Hiccup into locking his breakfast out."

"And me," Astrid adds.

"Fine, his breakfast and the person with his breakfast. In this case you."

"It was a bet on whether Hiccup could pick up more girls that Thuggory could or not," Astrid explains and Ruff answers with an extended silence. "Are you going to comment on that? Or have I

finally silenced you?"

"Next you're going to tell me that you three went to a bar and watched Hiccup waltz around charming women."

"Pretty much," Astrid admits quietly, tapping her heel against the woolen throw at the foot of her bed. "And I wasn't inside, because I didn't have my ID, but from what I heard, Hiccup had absolutely no issue and there was almost a lapdance involvedâ€|"

"Hiccup almost gave some chick a lapdance?" Ruff crows, laughing loudly enough that Astrid holds the phone away from her face. Ruff shouts the news across the room to someone behind her, presumably Fishlegs if the confused 'What?' is any indication.

"No, Hiccup didn't give someone a lapdance," Astrid scowls at that insinuation. "Someone almost gave him one."

"He didn't stick around for a lapdance?"

"I'm glad he didn't," Astrid sneers, looking around her room and trying to consolidate her earlier anger with this almost overwhelming smallness. "But...some chick offered him one, and he got some girl's number, and now he's locking me out."

"Are you jealous?" Ruffnut asks the obvious question and Astrid scoffs, chewing on the inside of her cheek. "Because it sounds like you're jealous. Plus, what are you doing making him breakfast if you aren't jealous?"

"What does me being jealous have to do with breakfast?"

"You're trying to seem like a perfect girlfriend," Ruff explains like it's the most obvious thing in the world and Astrid sighs, flinching as Spike's comforting lick almost enters her mouth.

"I didn't really give him a choice," Astrid admits sullenly, drumming her fingers on Toothless's ribcage. "And I know that he hates places like that. He practically has a self-imposed eight o'clock curfew on weekends. I justâ€|it was going to feel so good to win something, and winning ended up entailing Hiccup showing up with some other girl's number on his hand."

The following silence is anything but comforting.

"Have you told him that?" Ruff asks almost gently before laughing. "Because all I'm getting out of this is that Hiccup has a bedtime."

"No, I haven't told him that."

"You seem to be keeping quite a few secrets," Ruff points out and Astrid rolls her eyes.

"You've been dating Fishlegs for four years and he doesn't know that you hate apples," Astrid accuses, rolling her eyes and listening to Ruff mutedly asking Fishlegs if he heard that.

"It's a texture thing, and it's not-me hating apples is beside the point," Ruff mumbles the word like she's discussing an affair and

continues in an outwardly brash voice. "I'm picking you up tomorrow, and Hiccup doesn't know yet. When are you going to tell him?"

"Oh, that's exactly it!" Astrid snarks. "I'll just walk over-no hobble over-to his door and tell him that I'm leaving tomorrow and that I'm meeting with Nike and that it's absolutely certain I'll be running again soon."

"Does he not want you running?" Ruff spits the question, and it's the first time Astrid has ever really gotten the feeling that her friend doubts the continuity of her relationship. It makes Astrid defensive and she sets her jaw, earning a worried lick on the neck from Spike.

"He wants me to wait seven weeks like my doctor said."

"Nike won't wait that long," Ruff reminds her, as if she really needed reminding and Astrid growls.

"I know that."

"Hiccup is never going to get that you need running." And it's hammering some doubt in the back of Astrid's mind into place, as that easily overlooked athletic rift between them suddenly gapes like the grand canyon.

"He just wants me to be...safe."

Astrid doesn't want to be safe.

"He loves you," Ruff advises simplistically and a grudging smile finds its way to Astrid's lips. "But you can't let that slow you down."

"I'm not. I already said I'm coming up tomorrow, assuming you're not bailing on me."

"Good," Ruff smiles around the word, and Astrid hears her get up and walk out of a door, closing it behind her and continuing in an alarmingly too loud voice, all things considered. "So, please tell me that some kinky anger sex at least happened after Hiccup spent the night picking up chicks."

"No. No kinky angry sex happened," Astrid rolls her eyes and stares at that mockingly closed door, hoping that maybe if Hiccup does hear her, he'll at least come out. "Because he's mad at me, as we established. Not to mention he went and found a bunch of obviously willing women who aren't wearing massive knee braces."

"Come on, that brace doesn't have to slow you down," Ruff insists and Astrid rolls her eyes.

"Believe it or not, not being able to bend my knee is in fact slowing me down sexually. That's sort of crucial."

"No it's not," Ruff scoffs, and Astrid wonders where she is. Probably walking through the middle of campus practically shouting about hot angry sex and scaring the freshmen. "Just like...hmm, backwards parallel camel?"

"Is that supposed to be English?" Astrid asks, quirking an eyebrow.

"It's like...well, your foot is in the air-I can't believe you don't know what I'm talking about right now," Ruff sighs, obviously frustrated. "That's a staple."

"One leg, Ruff," Astrid defends for what feels like the thousandth time, turning down whatever crazy thing Ruff dragged Fishlegs into in favor of Hiccup's cherished balance.

"Come on, that doesn't mean you have to be _vanilla_."

"We are not vanilla," Astrid thinks back on her and Hiccup's last few, amazingly satisfying encounters and frowns when they come back a bit repetitive. Well, if it isn't broken, why would she worry about fixing it? Maybe it is broken, and that's why last night pushed Hiccup away. He saw that he's not seventeen and scrawny anymore. "We're at least French Vanilla."

"Sometimes you need some Rocky Road...Moose Tracksâ€¦the occasional Bubblegum," Ruff suggests with a lilt that suggests more offensive innocence on Astrid's part.

"I don't understand how this is going to help me any."

"I didn't realize you were asking for help." Ruff thinks for a minute. "I'd go for the old, one two punch of honesty and then sex. Like what you walked in on after Christmas Break." Astrid cringes at the too vivid memory of a very naked Ruff explaining to Fishlegs that she loved him, but she does not love his athlete's foot and it's something he needs to deal with.

"Why does _all_-and I mean all- of your advice involve me getting naked?" She groans and wipes a hand over her forehead. "I don't want to do the old one two. I want to go and talk to him, but he won't open the door."

"Right, because you're such a great talker."

"I can talk to my boyfriend about serious issues without being naked," Astrid wears the claim like a badge of honor. "Is that really such a bad thing?"

"Fine then, go talk to him. Don't take my advice." Ruff scoffs. "I don't give a shit."

"Yeah, you can keep your reverse camel."

"Backwards parallel camel."

"Whatever," Astrid rolls her eyes and commits the phrase to memory, a little too concerned with looking it up. She hates feeling stupid or behind just as much as she ever has. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Later. Tell me how the sex goes," Ruff signs off.

"Bye."

Astrid hangs up and sets the phone on her stomach, one hand on each dog as she stares up at the ceiling, listening to Hiccup scuffling around across the hallway. He's on the computer, getting clothes out of the dresser, just a little less finessed and cautious than normal.

She contemplates getting up and knocking, maybe he'd let her in this time, maybe they would talk and it wouldn't be so bad, and she'd just tell him that she's jealous and an idiot. Sometimes the truth is harder to say than any lie.

That's not even taking into account the fact that she's leaving tomorrow, half packet duffel hiding on the floor of her closet, full of pills and ice bags and a stolen shirt or two.

She gets up and shuts the door, laying with the dogs until his door opens with a creak and a heavy sigh; he leaves without confrontation.

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"Do you have the transmittal letter done yet?" Hiccup asks, more than a little tired of the sound of his own voice as Thuggory produces what must be his fourth small meal in this study session.

"Half done," Thuggory nods, reading through the two extant paragraphs and placing his cursor at the bottom.

"This is due in a week," Hiccup reminds his final project partner, and Thuggory rolls his eyes, secretly thankful for the nagging.

"I'll have it done, don't worry about it," he insists around a mouthful, "and don't forget I already sent the final report to you for a final edit," he chips in a bit of nagging of his own with a cheeky grin. Hiccup scowls, because Astrid is currently in possession of that final draft, and he's so confused and angry at her that he's honestly surprised that he's managing to think straight.

Doubting their relationship isn't his favorite past time, but something seems indomitably fishy about sending him on a quest for other women.

"And I have the drawings done...and the prototype is getting there," Hiccup sighs, tapping the end of his pen anxiously on the table. Thuggory's apparently belabored crunching weasels its way into Hiccup's sanity and he slams a frustrated palm down. "Do you ever stop eating? You're like Astrid with the-" His rant fades away with her too potent name on his tongue.

"I'm a bit prettier than Astrid," Thuggory jokes with a grin that fades at Hiccup's stony expression. "What's up, man?"

"I'm surprised you're so cheerful today after losing that bet last night."

"What are you talking about?" Thuggory laughs, sheepishly victorious. "If anyone lost that bet, it's Astrid. I've never seen her so pale as she was before you came out of the bar." Hiccup frowns.

"But I did so well," he snarks, and it might be the worst reaction to successful flirting that Thuggory has ever heard.

Even if Hiccup has no plans to act on it, shouldn't he at least be happy?

"Astrid was honestly freaked out."

"Freaked out by what she could possibly do with all of her...winning?"

It's not Hiccup's best line and he frowns, wishing Toothless were here. The wolf has an unfortunate ability of making him see things the way that they actually are, differentiating actual problems from simple misunderstandings. Not to mention the always receptive big bright eyes and the constant silent comfort.

Thuggory's roommate has a cat, who is currently making itself busy winding around Hiccup's metal foot and scratching its own chin on the sharp metal edge, but it's not the same.

"Freaked out that she literally gave you money to buy other girls drinks," Thuggory shrugs. "She literally said, 'I'm an idiot. He's in there acting as a party favor and it's my fault, I'm an idiot'," he regurgitates in an awkwardly placid tone and Hiccup's frown deepens.

"She said that to you?" That sort of broadcast doesn't exactly sound like Astrid, eternally prone to holding her frustrations in to blast her like an unclipped grenade.

"She said it to herself, I was just there," Thuggory acknowledges, still chewing. "She was almost as messed up as I was. You? Having that much game-"

"Hey! They were all over me, I did nothing," Hiccup insists and his friend nods, looking more than a little glum.

"Exactly, you didn't have to do anything," the look Thuggory gives his friend is most of all respectful. "It was impressive."

"Did Astrid put you up to this?" Hiccup asks, secure deadpan faltering slightly.

"No," Thuggory laughs, "but she did offer me full bragging rights if I didn't ever start anything like that again." Hiccup thinks back to the two of them muttering in hurried whispers in the car, shaking hands mysteriously.

"What did you guys bet in the first place?" Hiccup quietly finds his scent trail and Thuggory shoots him a knowing smirk.

"Bragging rights."

"So Astrid essentially forfeited?" Hiccup pieces the impossibility together too slowly, brows knit close together. "Astrid? As in my Astrid?" Thuggory nods. "No. No, she didn't."

"She shook on it," Thuggory shrugs, turning back to his laptop. "This Transmittal Letter has a one page limit, right?"

"Yeah, one page," Hiccup mumbles, smoothing a thumb over the stubborn, apparently permanent ink still on his hand.

"She was hot, by the way," Thuggory nods towards Hiccup's hand. "That girl?"

"I honestly didn't notice," Hiccup shakes his head. He's into scowls and knee braces and sloppy, sweaty ponytails. And Astrid's competitive streak, somehow. "Do you want her number? Because it's not coming off."

"Do you think it'd work if I told her that you broke my heart and I just need comfort right now?"

"Eh, maybe," Hiccup shrugs. "I don't really know much about that."

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Hiccup walks in with a mind to _talk_.

Astrid isn't on the couch, like he'd initially expected, and he frowns, leaving his backpack in the living room and searching back towards her bedroom. Spike is laying on the bed, curled around a blissfully napping Toothless and he steps inside long enough to scratch them and say hello, smiling in spite of himself at their genuine tail thumping greeting.

"Where's Astrid?" He mutters to them and Toothless rolls onto his narrow back, moping until Hiccup scratches his stomach. His leg kicks gleefully at the air for a moment before he rolls back onto his side and looks out into the hallway meaningfully. "Out there?" Hiccup frowns and glances across the hallway, trying to remember if he left his bedroom door closed, because it's definitely closed now.

He didn't close it.

He remembers that now, he'd thought about it, but Astrid was staring at him through her door and he didn't want to deal with it, so he left in a hurry.

Mildly intrigued, Hiccup stands and crosses the hallway with three purposeful steps, pausing with his hand on the doorknob before pushing inside.

He stops dead in his tracks, eyes bulging as his breath catches in his throat.

Astrid is laying on his bed, curled on her side with that knee brace sticking out at an admittedly awkward angle, wearing some sort of tiny, see through, lace _thing_. He didn't know she even owned anything like _that_, floaty and feminine, wrapping around her narrow waist and exposing those curvier than normal thighs.

He gulps and glances towards her face, finding disconcertingly earnest eyes above everything provocative and wonderful. She smiles and shifts slightly, rolling a little further away from him.

He doesn't agree that it's ermâ€¦cold in here.

"Hey," she greets, clearing her throat before continuing. "So, last night was really stupid."

"L-last night?" Hiccup stutters, glancing down her good leg as she stretches it out along the sheets, impossibly long and smooth. Last night? He thinks hard for a moment, swallowing back a mouthful of unintentional drool and finding some indignant seed somewhere back in the rational corner of his mind. "Right. Last night was really stupid. When did you figure that out?"

"As soon as you went inside," Astrid admits with a sheepish smile that looks far too good. He licks his lips and sticks his hands into his pockets, holding onto that spark. "I was going to come in after you, but I didn't have my ID."

Her words are too comforting, too lulling, and he breathes a little too hard, following the line of her insubstantial underwear over her hip and down under that floaty, appetizing, insubstantial and amazing thing. Where did she find that? How long has she had that? Why hasn't he seen that before?

Why is he still standing here when she is over there?

Right. He's mad about something.

Last night. All those women who he doesn't want to see naked.

Because he does want to see Astrid naked. He doesn't know whether he wants to look at everything she's wearing, or rip it off of her. Maybe both.

Both is good.

Mad. He's still supposed to be mad.

"That's not an apology," he manages, crossing his arms and gripping his elbows to try and keep his mind off of gripping anything else. Everything else. Hoisting her leg over his shoulder and plungingâ€”

"It was really stupid, and I'm sorry," she admits quietly, staring past his shoulder for a moment before looking cautiously at his face. He looksâ€”|peevish. Not necessarily angry with her, but he's not staring either.

This outfit feels ridiculous without his eyes on her and she wants to throw it off. Maybe throw it at him. That could be funny, Hiccup trying to free himself from a tangled lace entrapment while she gets comfortable.

They do still have more to talk about.

She doesn't want to tell him, because even now, it's obvious that he's not going to be happy. It's not going to be news worth celebrating and right now, moving forward feels like moving back. It's moving away, it's going against what he takes seriously, what he knows.

It's distracting her from the absolutely scintillating way that his eyes are sweeping over her body, sticking on all of those self-conscious new curves and making her feel unusually beautiful.

Pretty has never been an issue, but beautiful is a post-Hiccup construct.

"That's a little better," he grins, voice deep and rough in his throat as his hands move confidently to the hem of his shirt and start lifting it over his head. She sits up halfway, propping herself on an elbow and flushing unintentionally as his eyes flick determinedly downward. That stunned expression isn't exactly bad for her self-esteem and she straightens her back, drumming her fingers on her finally shaved and conspicuously bare thigh.

"I have something else to tell youâ€|"

"Yeah?" Hiccup asks, eyes glazed and tracing over her skin like lightning. His voice has taken on that maddeningly husky quality as he pries his shoe off with a metal _toe_, kicking it onto the floor behind him and moving back to pull off that shirt.

As much as she'd like it to come off, that won't exactly help her get the news out.

"I'm going back to Boulder tomorrow."

Hiccup stands up straight before slumping forward, eyes clearing as he frowns, no longer distracted.

"What?"

"I'mâ€|Nike e-mailed me back. They want to meet in Boulder on Tuesday."

"Well, I'll take off of my last class and drive you up," he offers, like it's the easiest solution in the world, and her gaze catches on those perennial dark circles under his eyes. She sets her jaw and continues.

"No, I can't ask you to do that. Youâ€|It's obvious that this is all wearing you down," she bites her lip and nods. "You need some sleep."

"That doesn't mean you have to go back to Boulder," he frets, and she feels like Toothless must when Hiccup pleads with him to pee on the deck when it's icy. "Astrid, justâ€|Let's nap now?" He suggests hopefully, looking down at her again and flushing beneath his freckles. "And then we can talk about Nikeâ€|"

"We need to talk now."

"Then why are you dressed like that?" He asks, gesturing in front of him and trying not to gape.

Again.

He doesn't know whether it's a blessing or a curse that he can see absolutely everything through the sheer fabric.

"Because you were mad at me, and I needed you to talk to me," she explains and he looks more than mildly peeved at her.

"So you gotâ€¦erm, mostly naked," his indignance falls short again, and it seems like he's breathing unnaturally hard. She'd like him a little closerâ€¦and she's starting to wonder just how far she can get that good leg over her head right now.

"I thought you'd avoid me otherwise."

"Thuggory told me that you forfeited," he admits quietly and she frowns, embarrassed.

"Like I said, that bet was stupid," she glances at that still marked hand and looks positively vicious. "And I do intend to make you forget anyone giving you their number."

Her grin is downright malicious and his whole body twitches.

"Already forgotten."

"Her name was Bridget," Astrid muses to herself, pausing to enjoy his reaction as she relaxes back onto the bed and stretches her arms above her head. "Wasn't it?"

"Something like that," he grumbles.

"We're going to forget that," she says resolutely and Hiccup nods.

"Way ahead of you."

"But first, we need to talk about me going back to school," she bites her lip, sobering and slouching against the bed.

"If you're only going to talk to Nike, can't you just come home after Tuesday?" He's obviously getting frustrated, and he's not exactly alone in that. Astrid wonders how Ruff ever makes this work, or if it just shortens the length of her serious talks.

Then again, Astrid wouldn't mind spending a while longer with him looking at her like this.

"Nike gave that other contract to someone else," she admits slowly, face falling grim. "They know about the knee, and I'mâ€¦I'm probably going to have to get back in shape quicker than anticipated."

"That's not really your decision," He reminds her, suddenly stern and surprisingly no less attractive. She bites her lip before continuing.

"You know this is my ticket, Hiccup. I've been going further on the bike andâ€¦I don't know what else to do, ok?"

"So you're going to start training again before you're ready?" He asks, more irritated than infatuated at the moment and she arches her back slightly, pressing her hips into the bed and trying to get

comfortable around the embers sparking in her abdomen.

"Not trainingâ€|strengthening," she sugar-coats the news.

"That's not smart, Astrid."

Stern Hiccup is working. Stern Hiccup is definitely working for her right now.

She thinks of her research earlier, and all of the things she hopes she can do one-legged, all of the ways she's going to snarl herself around him, trapping and pressing him to the bed andâ€|

"Hmmâ€|"

"What?" He asks, still frustrated above the undeniable husky infusion into his voice.

"Nothing," she mutters, coming back to the moment. "I don't know what else to do, Hiccup. I'm notâ€|I'm not marketable right now, I'm not going to be able to get a job and pay for grad school. Iâ€|I know how to run, so I'm going to run."

"You can't do that right now, you're going to hurt yourself worse andâ€|"

"Hey, Ruff is coming to get me tomorrow," she finalizes, sitting up and leaning back on the heels of her hands. Hiccup swallows hard as all that fullness moves more than she's used to, jiggling seductively under the lace. "We can argue more about this laterâ€|"

No they won't. She'll make sure that they won't.

She rolls onto her good knee with every intention of crawling towards him and grabbing his belt, tugging him forward onto the bed to get blissfully tangled up. Her bad knee sets her off balance and she slips forward onto her stomach with a grunt, and Hiccup barks out a laugh before he's distracted by her barely covered butt. She glares up at him, offering a more than satisfying view down her expanded cleavage before she pushes back to her knees and attempts to crawl forward with a bounce and a scoot.

Her legs slip out from under her again, and Hiccup barely restrains a snort.

"Astrid just stay there," he offers, stepping closer to the bed and pulling those itchy palms out of his pockets.

"No, just a secondâ€|" she insists, thinking for a moment before popping back onto her knees to fall again. "Oh!" The revelation hits and she rocks forward along her torso, pushing up with her arms and rocking again across the bed, satisfied enough with her progress to ignore how she actually looks.

Hiccup can't hold back the laugh this time as she flops across the bed like a clumsy seal, looking so absolutely pleased with herself. He bends forward, laughing too hard as she reaches out and grabs his belt, tugging him onto the bed with a surprisingly strong yank. He flops onto the bed face first, groaning and rolling to the side with

a stubbornly escaping chortle. She faces him, glaring and flushed as he holds his stomach and scoots the rest of the way onto the bed, trying to swallow the rest of his laugh.

"Justâ€¦Justâ€¦"

"Hey," she snaps before softening, "it's notâ€¦that was ridiculous, wasn't it?"

"Very," he admits, laughing and reaching over to stroke the point of her bare shoulder with careful fingers. She leans into the touch and sits halfway, tugging sheepishly at the bottom hem of his shirt. "Oh, that now?"

"Yes now, I've been in here for two hours. It's been lonely, and boring," she hints, leaning down to kiss him before pulling away and dragging the shirt up his stomach.

"Lonely huh?"

"Oh, come on Mr. Inquisitive," she yanks on his shoulder and helps him yank his shirt over his head, laughing when his chin catches and his hair frizzes upwards with a burst of resulting static. "I thought you were mad at me," her eyebrows disappear under her bangs as she runs a hand suggestively down his chest and starts with his belt, unbuckling it and yanking it out of his belt loops with a near whistle.

"I'm not letting you leave tomorrow," he tells her, momentarily earnest, before smiling. "But you're not going to be able to leave all of thisâ€¦" He gestures, unbuttoning his pants and shoving them down, taking his boxers with them and jolting when her small warm hand wraps around his shaft and grips teasingly.

She swings a leg over his lap and straddles him, nipping along his collarbone as his hands fly down her back, searching for a closure and finding too complicated laces and a double knotted bow. She licks across his nipple and his nails dig into her back as her delightfully heavier chest rests firm and sweet against his stomach.

"Ok?" She asks, sliding to kiss his neck and smiling at the systematic shiver running through him as she drags across his skin.

"Does this come off?" He asks, hands behind her back blindly tugging at the knot, frustrated.

"I figured we'd leave it on," she shrugs, laughing against the crook of his neck and mouthing at his pulse point as her hips start to rock slowly down against his. Her bad leg is sticking out and up, heel somewhere around his shoulder, but it doesn't necessarily seem like a bad thing. "I think I messed up tying it. We're going to need scissors to get it off."

"Nice," he chuckles, hand sliding down to cup her rear and knead the plump flesh lingering outside of her scant underwear.

"Plus, I thought you'd like it," she smirks, sitting up on his thighs and letting curious fingers drift to stroke him, fiddling gently with the soft hair trailing down from his navel. His eyes fixate on the

new curves, obvious and highlighted, and his hand raises slowly, cupping the side of her ribcage and thumbing the soft skin curving around the base of her breast.

"Come on," he urges, bucking against her hand and sliding two long fingers into the leg of her silky underwear and rubbing against her. "I like it."

"Mmmâ€|ok, ok," she reaches down and pulls his hand from her underwear, trying to shimmy them down and toppling sideways with a grunt. Hiccup sits and laughs at her confused expression as she tries to pull her underwear down over the brace and it catches on the Velcro, hanging up as she struggles to tug it down her stuck straight leg.

"Need help?" He asks reaching down and unbuckling his leg, letting it fall to the floor and kicking his pants to join it.

"Noâ€|" she writhes, trying to pull her leg to the side and try from that angle, tongue sticking out of the side of her mouth in concentration. "I can get it."

"Here, just let me help," he rushes her, rolling to his hands and knees and gently pulling those soft, fine underwear the rest of the way over her brace and tossing them over his shoulder with a grin. She frowns and sighs, flopping back onto the bed and letting a now limp arm fall across her eyes. Hiccup sits back onto his heel, leaning on his left hand and looking at her for a minute before breaking the silence with an uncomfortably worried question. She sort of got him a little more than raring to go. "What's wrong?"

"I'mâ€|I'm not in the _mood_ forâ€|gimpy," she complains, sitting up and drawing too much of his attention with that unintentionally elegantly arched back.

"Gimpy?" He asks, leaning towards her and kissing her shoulder while a hand slides down her side, still covered with that absolutely distracting _thing_. "By the way, where did you get this?" He pulls at its hem, loathing that too well done knot at the same time as he can't help but sort of enjoy the way that it's framing all of those unbelievably soft curves.

"On sale, if we're honest," she laughs, angling her head to the side as his lips slide up her neck, hot and smooth on her skin. "And I don't wantâ€|Does this ever get _boring_ for you?" She asks earnestly and he pulls back, frowning and suddenly nervous.

"Does it get boring for you?"

"No," she shakes her head adamantly, trying to backtrack over the question. "Never butâ€|Ruff called us vanilla."

"Compared to Ruff, we are sort of vanilla," Hiccup laughs, and Astrid's idle hand strokes up his thigh, flirting with his arousal and smiling as he twitches against the back of her hand.

"I was thinking we could _try_ a little rocky road," she offers with a downright devious grin, hiding a layer of nerves that Hiccup can barely see.

"Did Ruff call it rocky road?"

"She suggested bubblegum," Astrid grimaces. "I didn't want to ask about that."

Hiccup stares perplexed at the wall for a second before curling his upper lip and shrugging almost shyly, glancing down at himself and scooting a little closer to her.

"I sort of have better things to think about right nowâ€|" he frowns. "And I really don't want to wonder about what bubblegum could possibly mean."

"Right?" Astrid laughs, chewing her lip and smiling sheepishly at him. "I meanâ€|we're still going to try it."

"We are?" He asks, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, I meanâ€|yes, we are," she grins, popping smoothly onto her good knee and pushing his shoulders back onto the bed before clumsily clambering over him, brace sticking out at an awkward ninety degrees. Her hand slides down his chest and stomach appreciatively to wrap around him, stroking too enticingly. It's not fair. He can't say no to that. She has to know that he can't say no to the way her hand is spiraling so warm and familiar on his sensitive skin.

"What are we going to try, exactly?" He asks, bucking up into her hand, too distracted by the apex of her thighs pressed sweetly against his leg.

"I don't, know," she hums, leaning down and kissing him. It morphs into something long and distracted and she sighs against his lips as his hands slide up her back under those stubborn silk ties, caressing every notch in her spine. "Is there anything that you've ever wanted to try, but didn't want to bring up?" The mumble against his lips reverberates in his teeth and he laughs.

"I don't know, like what?"

She re-situates herself against his hips, getting comfortable and drumming her fingers pensively on his upper stomach.

"Likeâ€|any _fantasies_ you have or anythingâ€|" The word sounds corny and more forced than the lingerie that still feels ridiculous and she grinds down against him, regaining confidence from his delighted, squirming face. "I meanâ€|door's open," she offers with a shrug that comes an awkward second too late.

"Open?" He checks, wracking his brain for anything salacious that he's thought about, but hasn't had a chance to try. "Honestly, you wearing something like this is a big one," he fiddles with the edge of her lace negligee and she blushes. "So that'sâ€|checked offâ€|" his eyes take the long way back to her now crimson face. "What about you?"

"Hmâ€|" she thinks back to what she hasn't acted on, trying to dig up something salacious and worth the preparation. "Okâ€|" she pushes her hair away from her face and Hiccup's eyes catch on the responding movement of her barely shielded chest. "Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not going to laugh," he comforts, hand sliding to stroke at the skin of her good knee while his other hand remains trapped under her brace. He wants to ask her to free it, but it feels taboo to bring up her stiff leg.

"It's kind of hot when you're working on something in the garage, and you come inside all tired and filthy," she shrugs, immediately feeling exposed.

"I will remember that," he grins, "and you know that you could come out into the garage at any point, right?"

"Well, I know that, but I sort of want you to do something about it," and the real fascination comes out with an almost bumbling blurt.

"You do?" He asks, momentarily cautious before he almost leers, eyes lighting up. "So _that's_ what this is about?"

"What is what this is about?" She asks, nervous at him as his eyes rake down her front in a possessive way she's seen before, but is not quite familiar. "What is this?"

"You want me?" He pauses with a grunt, wrapping his free arm around her waist and flipping her shockingly deftly onto the flat of her back. "To do something about it."

"That is what I said," she adjusts her shoulders against the comforter, swallowing against the heart pounding a bit too hard in her chest. "But that also involved soot," she teases with a smile that feels more confident than it is and he quirks an eyebrow.

She remembers when his heavy hardness resting against her stomach would have been cause for alarm, or at least embarrassment, but now it's comfortable, nagging and yearning as her fingers itch to reach down. She restrains the urge, wondering where this might go and forcing herself to sit back for the ride.

If that's not rocky road, she doesn't know what is.

"You want me to go get sooty?" He asks with a laugh, leaning down and kissing down the column of her neck to nuzzle against her collarbone. Still sweet, still slow and caring like he always is, but there's an undercurrent of implacable confidence.

She likes that, and her hands curl in his hair, tugging gently at his scalp.

"Yes. Engine grease or this is a no-go."

"Yeah?" He asks with a snicker.

"Engine grease on your abs," she mumbles, stretching backwards and sighing as his careful fingers cup at her chest, stroking gently through the lace.

"I would, really," he laughs, low in his throat. "But I think I might cry if this got stained." He tugs at the lace, fingers hooking around her still evident hipbones as he drags her further under him, rocking

his hips against her.

"Come on, don't _admit_ that," Astrid moans as he nips at the shell of her ear, running his tongue along the edge and blowing cool air over the moisture. "You're ruining the illusion."

"What illusion?" He sits back slightly.

"The one where you're a manlyâ€|sooty guy. You don't cry."

"Oh," he grins and slides off of her, dropping off of the foot of the bed and fumbling for his leg before buckling it on. "I'm going to need my leg for thisâ€|"

"For what?" She sits up on her elbows, appraising his long lean lines and tapping her good foot against the edge of the bed.

"This," he grins, walking around the side of the bed and picking her up too easily in his arms.

A reluctant voice in the back of her head likes the fact that all she had to do was mention occasionally enjoying his manliness, and, it came out in droves.

She likes this confidence, likes the comfort and trust that she never really thought she'd have. She knows that whatever happens in the next few hours will be nice, and _fun_, and that she'll sleep well, even from her own lonely bed across the hall.

She's really liking the wiry bicep clenched and curled around her shoulders a little too much. It's a little too close, a little too warm.

"Are you taking me anywhere in particular?" She asks, trying to sound snippy and falling short somewhere around demure. He grins at her tone, holding her a little closer to his chest and spinning her towards the desk, setting her down to perch on the edge of the wood. "Oh, the desk, that's old news." The challenge is oddly hollow and choked in her chest, and Hiccup's grin widens.

"Old news?" He looms closer over her, pressing his forehead against hers and grinning madly as soft, greedy hands slide up her sides, tracing the grooves of her ribs. "You're a tough critic today, Astrid."

"I am?" She asks, coy tone falling flat as he steps up between her thighs, brushing hard and urgent against her hipbone.

She's not going to come out and admit that this isâ€|interesting. That seems like losing, throwing in a towel that she's not quite ready to let go of yet. She's absolutely unaware when this became a competition, and she wishes for what feels like the thousandth time that she had some other outlet for this. If this weren't some sort of challenge right now, he would already be _doing_ something.

Something, anything, everything. She's open.

Or she will be as soon as she proves that she actually is a match for this disarmingly game Hiccup. She'd be lying if she said she didn't

think it's crossed his mind that he can convince her to stay.

That reawakens the fire stifled by his arousing lead blanket.

"Yeah, a little hard to please," he's almost too smooth, hand sliding slickly over her thigh to toy idly between her legs, flirtatious and scintillating.

"You know," she reaches down and wraps her hand around his length, pumping determinedly. She'd hoped it would relieve a bit of the urge, but honestly the whole situation just seems more urgent, tighter and further clenched inside of her. "I wouldn't exactly say putting me on the desk is trying very hardâ€¦did you have a further plan for this?" She nearly giggles as he nips at the side of her neck, stopping to suck on her earlobe.

"Not reallyâ€¦" he admits with a laugh, "nothing's on the tip of my tongue."

"Maybe that's your problemâ€¦" Astrid suggests, raising her eyebrows and leaning back enough to make eye contact.

"That's my problem? That I don't have anything to say right now-" He asks, clearly not getting her insinuation before his eyes spring wide and his lips slip into a sly grin. "Oh? That is my problem?"

"I'm just saying it could be a factorâ€¦" she scoots closer to the edge of the desk, thighs spreading further around his hips. Her bad knee is sticking straight out from the edge of the desk, but it doesn't seem important, no matter how awkward it looks. "You could see if it gives you ideasâ€¦"

"Are you going to come up with any ideas here?" He asks, a bit shy, some of that strength enforced confidence fading as he shivers a bit in the less than warm room.

"Hey, I started this whole thing," she looks down, still feeling ridiculous in the lace. His gaze follows hers and her face heats up, knees spreading imperceptibly wider. "Come on, manly engine grease guy would continue this," her grin is pure and calming enough to earn a smiling response. His hands find her hips and slide down to his knees, pulling them slightly further apart and dropping to kneel in front of the desk. She leans back on her hands with a smile, scooting closer to the edge of the desk. "Anytime now," she laughs as his warm palms slide up her inner thighs.

He dives in with a chuckle that vibrates against the very core of her and she squeals in spite of her best intentions, arching forward against his tongue. He drags it fully across her, pressing hard into the wet folds and smiling against her as she squirms.

She's already past wet, towards soaked, and it's something of a shock. If it's this immediately effective, he's going to be sure to carry her around the room more often from here on out. It wasn't exactly horrible for him either, feeling strong and capable. Her good heel curls around the back of his neck and presses him closer to her with a satisfied moan that spurs him to pick up the pace on this entire escapade.

He was doing alright until she started whimpering, really.

He stands up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and leaning over her on the desk. Her knee ended up hooked on his shoulder somewhere along the way and it sticks there, by her ear as he leans in to kiss her, hands on either side of her hips on the desk. She pulls him closer with the calf pressed against the back of his neck, leaning onto one hand and reaching down to line him up with her entrance.

"Now?" He affirms, and she's oddly gratified that he still asks, no matter how manly he's trying to be.

And really succeeding, not that she's necessarily going to tell him that.

"Yeah," she nods against his shoulder and he pushes in with an electrifying groan against the soft skin on the inside of her knee. "Come on," she urges, wrapping an arm around his back and pulling herself closer with that knee over his shoulder. "Ah, shit, condom," she huffs at the realization, leaning back deflated.

He opens the desk drawer and pulls out a foil wrapper. She quirks an eyebrow at the placement.

"What? We used to use the desk a lot?" He flushes defensively, her knee still over his shoulder as he rips open the packet and slides the condom on, grabbing her shoulders.

"Where else do you have a stash?" She laughs, tugging him closer and moaning at the ineffective brush between her legs. "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

"Badâ€|bad angle," he assesses, wiggling his hips against her and trying to scoot his foot back from the desk to correct the position. His metal foot catches in the carpet and he does his best to ignore it. "Do-here," he grabs her ass with a hand and rocks upright, carefully leaning to avoid her bad leg as his other hand slides to her hip, sliding her the rest of the way onto him. Her knee slips from his shoulder, leg still trapped within the cage of his arms, calf pressed against his collarbone as her other leg sticks straight behind him, brace holding it awkwardly aloft. "Better?" He asks, beaming and turning to kiss the side of her ankle, conveniently next to his mouth.

"Alright," she laughs and he twitches at the responding clenching around him. "I'd like it if youâ€|moved," she nudges her hips against his as much as she can and he holds her close, fearing his wobbly knees and turning to press her up against a bare plane of the wall. She bucks up into him, reflexively cringing away from the cold plaster and he presses harder against her, holding her there with firm hips. "Sorry, cold."

"It's ok though?" He asks and she nods, rocking insistently against him with the slight leeway that she has between him and the wall.

"Stop teasing," she insists, eyes suddenly stony as her hands grip at his shoulders. "You can't start carrying me around if you're not going to back it upâ€|oh!" She squeaks as he pulls out and pushes back in, grinning at her satisfied reaction.

"I'm backing it up," he insists with a grin, shaking his head as emphatically as he can through the sensations rippling up his spine. Her fingernails dig into the skin of his shoulder as her head thunks back against the wall with a groan.

"Ouch."

"Careful," he mutters, tucking his forehead into the wall over her shoulder and sighing low in his throat as the reason to talk disappears from the forefront of his mind. His hips snap almost of their own accord against her, wet and almost too loud in the comparative silence of the room. Astrid tugs herself up with manacles clamped onto him, moaning as the new angle jars something sensitive deep inside her. "There?" He asks with an urgent grunt and she nods, her entire body trembling and quaking between Hiccup's firmness and the wall.

There's something appealing about this position, pressed so close against all of those lithe muscles, clenched with the effort of holding her up, freckled and pale under her fingers. She opens her eyes slightly to look at him, face pressed into the wall, huffing and clenching his jaw as the smooth motion of his hips becomes erratic. His fingers dig into the points of his hips with one last unbearably deep thrust and he twitches, almost crushing her into the wall as he drains inside of her.

She gasps at the sudden swollen throbbing, rubbing soothing hands over his shoulders as he toddles backwards with an unsteady clicking before flopping backwards onto the bed and groaning at her warm solid weight on his chest. She tries to scoot upwards, stiff right leg stuck straight against the side of the bed as she tries to pull off of him.

"Little help?" She eventually asks with a quiet laugh and his hands slide to her hips, lifting too easily and slipping out of her with a still sensitive hiss. "Thank you," she mumbles, lying down beside him and resting her head on his shoulder, dragging her stiff leg onto the bed next to them, like a third party who's not quite welcome, but impossible to kick out.

"Don't thank me yet," he mutters, tired, still shaking hand snaking down her front and finding her slick warm clit. It's still sensitive, still warm and eager, and she's trembling after a few hard rubs, groaning when three determined fingers find their way into her, rubbing at the spot deep inside of her while his thumb tends to the outside. She moans and springs taut surprisingly quickly under the ministrations, almost arousing enough in that somehow still intact lingerie to resurrect him.

"Okâ€|now, thank you," she mutters, completely sated and more than a little exhausted.

"You're welcome."

"I love you," she grins and he snakes a long exhausted arm around her neck, tucking her into his side.

"You can't go," he mutters against her sweat damp hair, wildly uncomfortable with a wide wrinkle of snarled comforter pressing into

his spine.

"I have to go."

"You have to stay, so that we can do more of _that_," he tries.

"We can do plenty of that tonight."

"I don't want you to go," and it's a last ditch effort, so raw and open in her ear that she finally frowns, hiding her face in his chest.

"I don't want to either," she sighs. "But I have to. It's my shot."

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**It didn't want to split, and I sort of liked the concept that they're only mad for a single chapter. But seriously you guys, this chapter has Ruff, Thuggory, AND smut. I need to hear back and I need to hear what you guys have to say. Because you are spoiled, and getting another chapter on Sunday, and it's a Friday so it's the weekend and TGIF. **

**I will finish up responding to last chapter's reviews tomorrow, and thank you in advance for all of them. **

**Also, thank you for Goonlalagoon for submitting that piece of fanart, I'm working on her reward ficlet this weekend and to anyone else who's interested, a picture is worth a thousand words.
**

**Soâ€¦to sum up this too long author's note, please review. I just dumped my bag of tricks out on the page here. **

14. Chapter 14

**And back to a normal sized chapter with plot! What is this nonsense? **

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Early Sunday evening, Astrid is on the phone, ordering pizza, when Gerard walks into the kitchen.

"Ok, actually make that two larges," she amends the order, looking down briefly at her slightly tighter stomach and sighing. "No, no cinnamon sticksâ€¦thirty minutes? Alright, thank you," she hangs up the phone and turns to Hiccup's father. "Hey, pizza is on the way."

"I heard," he laughs conspiratorially and leans back against the counter as Spike wags around his feet. "No cinnamon sticks, huh?"

"No," she sighs, a bit sheepish as she wraps an arm around her stomach. "I'm learning that I can't exactly eat the same way when I'm not running," it sounds obvious now, and she regrets every angsty cupcake.

"I remember that shock," he smiles wistfully and pats his stomach in a way that makes Astrid want desperately to streak for a treadmill. "I was recuperating from the shoulder, and one day Val informed me that I wasâ€|oh, how did she put it? She said I was expanding."

"Ouch," Astrid laughs at that and wishes for not the first time that she could have had the chance to meet Hiccup's mother. "The scale bit me," she admits quietly, and the smile that floats onto her face is not quite natural, but definitely better than screaming or scowling. "Well, after my pants didn't quite fit, the scale bit me again."

"And here I was thinking Henry probably wedged his foot in his mouth and pointed it out to you," Gerard shakes his head.

"Oh, and I was hoping that he didn't talk to you about all _that_," she grimaces and stares at the floor, tapping her good foot against the tile with a barefoot slap.

"He didn't say much," the man comforts, staring towards the dog dishes lurking beneath a counter covered in stray and abused nuts and bolts, a Hiccup type brand in the middle of the kitchen. He wishes it had always been there. He decides it's in the monument's best interest not to mention seeing everything he didn't want to and he sets to righting the situation at hand. "So you two are alright? Everything is ok?"

"Yeahâ€|we'reâ€|" Hiccup has been trying to keep her from leaving all day, three separate occurrences of sicking Spike's big blue eyes on her and saying just how much the dog will miss her. Toothless is in on it too, leaning on her and smiling up at her with shiny eyes at every opportunity. "We're fine."

"That's good to hear," Gerard smiles, pushing off of the counter and peering around the doorway quietly. "And I've got to go talk to Henry, apparently he has something important to tell me." Astrid frowns at that, back of her neck itching with a wariness that she can't quite place as she steps aside to let him through.

"Well, I don't think it's anything _too_ serious, he hasn't told me anything," she shrugs, peering unhealthily curious over her shoulder into the next room. Hiccup sets his textbook aside when his father enters and stands, waving him out of her sight. She has half a mind to lurk and listen by the doorway, but something stops her, something honest and loathe to stoop to those snooping levels.

Just because she feels like bursting into rooms, surefooted and confident, is out of her range at the moment, doesn't mean that she should start acting like this situation is permanent.

Because it's really not. She's exercising, already feeling slightly stronger, slightly healthier beneath this reluctant _new_ body that still feels foreign on her frame. The scale is a little less convincing, mocking her irrational amount of sweat and tears with a humbling 111, but it shouldn't be long before she changes that too. She's getting this back under control, sweeping those weeks of antsy insecurity under the rug and charging back into who she used to be.

Going back to Boulder, it's not pride, it's not even as desperate as it originally felt. It seems like the next logical step, moving past all of this and getting back to what she's supposed to be doing. Her team is going to Nationals on Friday and it feels worlds away. She feels displaced more than hurt, yanked out of everything that's been her stability for the last four years. Hiccup has been the fun, the adventure, and there's something horribly mundane about being suddenly privy to his own boring every day.

She doesn't want to sit here, itching and healing, absolutely miserable, while Hiccup does homework and the dogs spend their time napping. She likes to remember Spike younger, more vibrant and Toothless without the five gray hairs that have recently sprouted on his chin. She's not ready to be done with the running, truthfully. It's something that's going to bug her for the rest of her life if she doesn't try.

If she just lets all of this happen to her, losing any contractual support she might have had, losing that athletic identity, is she really still herself? It doesn't feel like pride anymore, even though it probably is. It feels like an absolute necessity. Sure, she could ride down on the sinking ship, but isn't it worth it to at least try to survive the crash?

The more that she thinks about it, the less desperate for money she is, and the more she craves sameness. The long early morning runs, the peaceful confidence that her legs would do what she asked of them, when she asked.

It's just it's time for her to go make things normal, because it's obvious that they aren't tumbling into place this time.

In fact, they've tumbled eight pounds and what she has the sneaking suspicion is a cup size out of order.

She hears Hiccup and his father walk back into the living room, an awkward off cant rhythm of three feet and a tap that somehow brings a smile to her face. She will miss that. No matter how long she's gone, she can never seem to get over the absence of Hiccup in her every day. The long lazy attempts to get him out of bed while he so carefully finagles her under the covers. The way that his eyes light up when Toothless greets him at the door, paragraphs passing in a few seconds of silence.

She's going to miss home like she always does.

The two men walk into the kitchen a moment later and she's about ready to say as much, thank them for helping her, for dealing with all of this, but the words evacuate when she sees Jerry's now solemn face.

"Astrid," the man starts in that almost formal parental voice and she freezes, standing off of the counter, "you're training again?" The tone slaps her harder than the actual question, like he caught Spike digging another hole in the yard.

"I'm supposed to" She starts, but the reason burns the back of her throat on the way up and her features sharpen into a scowl. "I'm pretty sure I can handle this."

"I know it's hard being hurt, and that you want to get back out thereâ€" "

"I don't need this lecture," she smiles, exasperated as she crosses her arms and looks anywhere but the twin sets of green eyes staring at her from across the kitchen. "This is ridiculous," she pushes onto two surprisingly steady feet, feeling strong and undeniably persecuted for the first time in a while. "I don't know what Hiccup told you butâ€" "

"I told him that you were in talks with Nikeâ€" " Hiccup interjects in that horribly calm voice that normally means Toothless has a splinter, and it kicks this irrational anger up a notch.

"Yeah, who said that was yours to tell?" She snaps at him and he has the sense to look briefly at the ground before exhaling too calmly and reestablishing eye contact.

God, he's giving her that face.

The face that means it, the face that makes misbehaving dogs and her more misguided tantrums fall to the wayside. Right now, it's just infuriating, a look that he would give a child who was caught doing something against the rules.

"Astrid, we want to make sure that you don't hurt yourself."

"Oh, so thisâ€|this little intervention is for my own good?" She asks, gesturing to the berth of open floor between them, like they expect her to whirl and punch someone. "You should be happy for me, two weeks ago I couldn't straighten my leg and now I'm ready to startâ€| " training. She bites her tongue against that particular word and settles into her remarkably balanced stance, rephrasing with an unmistakably bitter taste on her tongue. "I'm ready to work it more. You were there, the doctorâ€" "You know what? I shouldn't have to explain myself here."

"Astrid," Gerard starts, like her name is some sort of guarantee that she'll be sufficiently sucked in by that voter winning tone. "We're only worried that you're pushing yourself too soonâ€" "

"I'm supposed to be riding the bike."

She immediately hates how petulant that defense sounds. Almost as much as she hates the fact she's standing here defending herself.

"You should check with your doctor before you start training in any other capacity."

Every insolent micron left inside of her strangles a bit on the pretense that Gerard is scolding her like a parent.

"I'm not doing anything that my doctor said not to do," she manages through a scowl and Hiccup's eyes pierce her cheek, astute and persuasive. Her knee throbs under her, dull and blameless, and she wants to sprint out the door, just to prove that she can. If she can. The question sinks in her chest and she crosses her arms, jutting her jaw forward and remaining undoubtedly steadfast. "I'm not going to

sit around forever."

"No one is saying you should sit around forever," Hiccup's father mollifies. "Does this have to do with your classes?"

"What is this?" She looks over his wide shoulder at his son, who is perched against the dining room table, equally staunch. His eyes give away nothing and her scowl deepens against her will, eyes pinching in thought as she tries to piece everything together. "It's not about classes, although I wouldn't mind getting back to that either."

"And with Nike?"

"You told him about Nike?" Astrid looks again towards Hiccup, who shrugs as if he had no other choice.

"If that's about the money?" Gerard starts, so genial, so overwhelmingly supportive, and that last straw seems to snap in her brain.

"Of course it's about the money! How else am I going to pay for my life?" His sympathetic eyes are all the answer that she needs and she stomps before she can help it, feeling seventeen and horribly out of control. "It's—I can't ask for any more of your money, or your time, and I can do this," she insists, but it doesn't sound empowered somehow, and she finds herself doubting her own voice through the din of blood rushing through her ears. She feels held down, something big stepping on her heel and holding her anchored to the ground, indefinably impossible to push off. "I know that I can do this, and I need to prove to Nike that I can do this, and that means I can't walk into this gimping."

"No one is saying that you can't do this."

Not in so many words.

She can't think of any retort that doesn't make her sound like the child she's insisting she isn't.

She checks her watch and exhales carefully.

"Ruff might beat the pizza here."

"Does Ruff think that this scheme is a good idea?" And it's so minimizing that Astrid can see every proposed invention that an excited young Hiccup came up with shot down in front of her eyes. It's too much and she scoffs, sliding sideways around him and heading determined towards the front doors.

Hiccup stops her with a look. Desperate, kind and caring. Manipulative.

She chews on the inside of her lip and turns to face the pair of them from a different angle, feeling farther away but less trapped and utterly unable to decide which position is worse.

"Ruff understands."

"You're too close to this to be making decisions that are going to affect you forever."

"Oh, so you're telling me if you'd sat around longer, you would have gone back to football?" The words feel impossibly harsh on her tongue, but she can't stop, plowing farther into this normally untouchable path. "You're saying that you didn't hate recovering, that it didn't drive you crazy to see your team and _life_ move on around you while you couldn't do anything yourself?"

Her fists clench and unclench by her sides and she forces eye contact far beyond when it becomes uncomfortable.

"Well, you three suck at playing happy family."

Everyone in the room whips their heads around to face Ruff, who's casually leaning on the doorframe, chewing on an already ragged fingernail.

"Did you miss out on that whole 'knocking' lesson in kindergarten?" Hiccup snaps, pushing away from the table and looking at Astrid with naked, pleading eyes.

"Probably," Ruff grins. "Plus, I did knock, you just missed it because of yell-y over here."

Ruff looks at Astrid, concerned, and she feels like she might explode.

"Do you want to go?" Astrid snips, trying her best not to flee the scene but feeling like an escapee anyway as her hip smacks into the corner of the counter on the way out. It throws her forward onto her bad knee and she winces, bobbling and catching herself on the single foot. Hiccup lurches forward, primed to catch her and she shoots a glare over her shoulder, standing straight and ignoring the amplified throbbing. "Let's get out of here."

"You promised pizza," Ruff hisses too loudly to constitute a whisper and Astrid snarls, gesturing her towards the door.

"Astridâ€" Gerard tries one last time with that gentle voice.

"Come on, let's go."

Astrid storms out and Ruff follows sheepishly, looking somehow too large and out of place in Astrid's chilled wake. After a moment of silence, Spike lays against the front door, head on her paws.

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Astrid is sick of hiding her limp already when she slumps into the dorm room, flopping back onto her bed and toeing off her right shoe with an exaggerated huff. Ruff laughs from her seat at the opposite desk procrastinating and turns to face her obviously exhausted friend.

"Long day sweetie?" She asks, almost missing the days when the endearment made Astrid deeply uncomfortable.

"Did you know this entire campus is on a hill?" Astrid complains, propping herself onto her elbows and letting her brace take more of

leg's lazy weight. "Because it is. Every single one of my classes was on top of some hill."

"Lazy ass," Ruff snorts, picking up her phone briefly before tossing it onto her unmade bed.

"I think I might skip the gym tonight." It's like a shameful secret, half under her breath and spoken mostly to the one shoe she's still wearing. "I feel like my feet are about to fall off."

"Seriously, when did you get so whiny?" Ruff laughs, "I miss you running three hours a day."

"Believe me, me too." She bends down, untying her other shoe and kicking it off before fiddling with the straps of her brace. "And I'm sick of this thing."

"Come on, it doesn't look that bad. You only have to support half of your new fatty weight."

"So funny," Astrid glowers before pulling back to look slightly smug. "Plus, I lost two pounds."

"Since you abandoned cupcakes as a food group?"

"Yeah, something like that," she stands, stepping out of the brace and quickly changing from still slightly uncomfortable jeans into her second best sweatpants. Her most comfortable, forgiving sweats are in a pile on the floor of Hiccup's bedroom, somewhere by the dresser. After wiggling her left foot into place, balanced precariously on an untrustworthy stilt, she pauses to adjust the line of her bra that's been digging into her back all day. "Neither of those two pounds came from up top though."

"You should be happy, you've always been jealous," Ruff grins cheekily, grabbing her own sports bra through her CU Field Hockey uniform.

"Ugh, it's not all it's made out to be." She rolls her eyes and limps to perch on the edge of her mattress, cringing at the way her awkwardly tight bra straps dig into her shoulders. "My back is killing me, none of my clothes fitâ€"

"Hiccup doesn't know what to do with allâ€|that," Ruff gestures after a pause and Astrid rolls her eyes.

"And you said I've been spending too much time with Hiccup." A blush rises to her cheeks as the actual point sinks in and she shrugs flippantly. "And nothing like that, he's a fan."

"Oh?" She leans a little closer to the conversation, elbows on those two absolutely intact knees. "A little hot fudge on that French vanilla?"

"I don't want to know what that means."

"No, no. I can see it. You guys are taking a break from the hipbone fencing," Ruff grins and Astrid shrugs.

"Well, that part is handy," she definitely doesn't miss that

occasional bone on bone smack that ruins a mood like nothing else. She does already miss Hiccup like crazy and her face falls into a slightly pinched frown.

"Have you talked to him?"

"No."

"Well, aside from the part where you yelled at a Congressman and I fell in love with youâ€"

"Eww," Astrid interjects.

"That looked pretty messy last night," Ruff finishes, face painted with genuine concern and Astrid falters.

"It wasn't great," she admits quietly. "I probably should have stopped to say goodbye, or something. Stayed long enough to keep them from being saddled with two large pepperoni."

"_Two _large pepperoni?" And the anguish is real and raw on Ruff's openly expressive face. "We missed out on _two_ pizzas?"

"Awesome to know that you're dwelling on the pizzas here."

"I'mâ€"Call Hiccup, alright?" Ruff chastises, standing and tugging her uniform over her head and pulling on her bathrobe. "You've got the room, so if you need some wicked hot, new boob phone sex, do it now."

"So gracious," Astrid rolls her eyes and flops back onto the bed, closing her eyes as the door latches behind her roommate.

The silence is hard, sharp against the budding ball in her throat, and she really does consider calling. Just to hear his voice, just to sayâ€|to say what? Sorry? For what?

Sorry is what will come out, because she wants this to be happy, and easy, and if she's learned anything over the past few years it's that sorry and thank you don't actually kill her on the way out. She's not ready to apologize, it's too early in her head, some dregs of pride still clinging to this mess and keeping it messy.

She knows that Ruff is right, and that she should call and tell him that she's not working too hard, let him know that she skipped the gym while it's true and back out of this whole incident before it blows up into something worse.

But she doesn't want to hear it right now. She's meeting with Nike tomorrow and she wants to be excited and fresh.

She'll call him after her meeting tomorrow, ifâ€"no, _when_â€"she has good news.

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"Astrid?" The man is tall, and his slick suit stands out among the sloppy college students in the hallway outside of the conference room. The school was more than happy to provide a meeting room for

this, given that one of their athletes is meeting with such a high brow client, and Astrid assured them that the CU black and gold logo would show up somewhere.

Which is a fib. She sincerely doubts she's going to have say in any of this. It's back to a far more lucrative shadow of the running requirement she's been forwarding for the rest of her college experience. Run and school is paid for. It's absolutely the same set of rules, she's just less in shape to adhere to them.

She's already sick of fibbing, and clinging onto this chance already, but it's one of those times where the alternative is unbearable.

Back to Evergreen, healing under lock and key with her foot in her mouth and an artificially inflated bank account that makes her feel _bought _and indebted.

"It's good to meet you Mrâ€|" She steps forward, swallowing a wince as her entire leg trembles under the strain to act normal. Ruff suggested she should go to the meeting brace-less, and she really had to agree. The closer that she seems to running form, the more likely they'll be to trust her with anything.

She misses the brace more than really seems possible. It feels like the outside world is eons closer to the joint that's already inflamed and irritated from the few hours without support. Every time someone moves a chair within five feet of her, she flinches, waiting for the hard edge to make contact with her knee and shatter this faÃ§ade of health faster than a fall down the stairs.

"Mr. Ryan," the man introduces himself with a bracing handshake that Astrid returns before sitting and holding in a relieved sigh that she made it to the chair without incident.

She imagines calling Hiccup and telling him that she fell on her face in the middle of a meeting, and his disappointed laugh. He'd see it as an omen that she should have stayed longer and recovered more, and she would see it as reason to punch Ruff for suggesting she leave the brace behind.

This wouldn't even be hard with the brace, would it? She walked around Boulder yesterday, bundled against gravity, and didn't have any significant issue. Hills and stairs are still harder than they should be, but she's going to fix that little glitch before she ever has to admit it.

This is all going to gloss over in the best possible way.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Ryan," she smiles and grits her teeth as she seamlessly crosses her bad knee over her good one, putting on a show of how easily it bends and hangs.

"I see that knee of yours is doing better," the man's grin is absolutely relieved, and Astrid echoes the emotion with bright eyes that clear as she leans forward in her seat, ignoring the disturbing pull in the joint.

It's just stretching out. It's absolutely normal.

"It is, I'm really glad I've had such a quick recovery," she smiles, hoping that he doesn't notice the rest of her physical symptoms. Reduced muscles in her thighs, fat deposits that she's never had to deal with before softening the edges of her hips and pressing pronounced against the tighter waistband of her pants.

This morning, she almost felt like she looked like herself, prodded and bolstered by Ruff until she was ready and bragging about how easy this meeting would be, how quickly she'd have everything signed and sealed. Now, it's all hollow, and she wonders where the bravado leaked out. She can't look strong right now, she doesn't look like a runner, streamlined and angular.

"You young athletes," Mr. Ryan shakes his head, patting his hip and looking at her jealously. "Hip injury in my senior year ruined my soccer career, and there was no way I was coming back from that."

She wonders when she became a sponge for everyone else's failure stories, and refuses to think that something shifted inside of her towards reception when she came so close to being like them.

She's not going to be like them, retired and unfulfilled. She can't let this end that way.

"Well, I'm not quite back yet," she minimizes the throbbing travelling up her thigh in a steadily creeping wave. "But I am getting there."

"We're glad to hear it, and we're hoping to help," he proposes, thankful for the segway into the meat of their meeting, leaning forward and opening a manila envelope. "What do you think of this?" He slides a shiny flyer across the table towards her and she leans forward, looking down at it. It's a shoe, clunkier than the Mizunos that she tends to favor, mostly white with blue detailing around the arch and heel. The heel isn't quite normal, padded or studded or sprung in a distinctive way that makes the shoe pitch forward ever so slightly.

"It's a shoe?" She asks after a minute, freezing when it comes out with a lilt of that sarcasm skimmed off of Hiccup's presence. "Uhâ€¦a nice shoe?" She amends, but Mr. Ryan laughs, sliding another piece of paper towards her.

"This is the inaugural footwear in Nike's new Recovery line," another flyer is presented in front of her showing the complicated inner workings of a knee and ankle, surrounded by slick borders and mellowed anatomy talk that would surely drive Hiccup mad. "We're wanting to open a market for supportive, athletic shoes geared towards anyone who's ever been injured. This patent pending sole," he points to the shoe's odd heel, "is perfectly cushioning, allowing the joint to strengthen without taking all of the runner's body weight at once, allowing for a slow acclimation."

"So you want me to prove it works?" Astrid asks, picking up the flyer and holding it closer to her face, looking for anything in the ink that justifies the properties Mr. Ryan is trying to sell her.

"Exactly," he smiles slowly, and Astrid gets the feeling he has a bit

more spiel in his back pocket. "We want someone like you to train with the shoe on the way to a comeback."

Comeback?

She doesn't want to believe that she's really far enough gone to constitute someone reaching for a comeback, but she lets herself internalize the words as kindling to her fire.

"Someone like me?" She asks slowly.

"A young strong athlete," he compliments and she subconsciously prepares for a hammer, "who is recovering from an injury with the intent to go pro."

Pro.

There's the kicker.

For runners, professional means races, big stakes city wide marathons with prizes for everyone above tenth place. The 5k's advertised by charities who always seem to give half of the earnings away to the top three runners.

It's not something she's ever really thought about, but then again, she didn't think past college until very recently. Running always just seemed like something that would fade away into the glory days, something that she'd always do but stop profiting from. Sure, she's thought about the Olympics, and been on the short list for a trial that never quite panned out when some super star soccer player offered to run the 3k and garnered more Olympic attention than she ever would. She's thought about the next games, and the miles, and the travel to even more world's and nationals.

It was always an option, but never _the_ option.

"So I wear the shoes to recoverâ€¦" she starts the inquiry cautiously, mulling the whole idea over in her mind, "and then I race, and if I winâ€¦?"

"What we're looking for here, Astrid, is a triumph," he grins, and if he were selling her a used car, she'd ask Hiccup to check under the hood. Twice. "We want people to see the lengths that the human body can go to in search of greatness. We want a recovery worth talking about, and if it goes well, we want someone who can move up to advertising for our professional line, because that's really what's possible here."

"So I wear the shoes to recover, race, win and then you want to keep me on as a spokesperson?" She wishes they'd just hand her a contract, let her read it, mull it over and check for a million little loopholes they're probably trying to slip past her.

What if the shoes don't work for her? She's always had a supination problem in everything but her trusty mizunos, and she's not going to be doing her knee any favors training with an improper step.

What if she can't get as fast again? Does she have to race in the shoes, or can she default to flats come race time? Because speed is going to be hard enough as is on her diminished knee.

What if she gets hurt again?

The terrifying question echoes through her brain and she silences it as best she can with a jut of her jaw and a correction of her dismally drooping posture. Strong. She's here to look strong.

"That would be the ideal path here," he nods encouragingly and she pauses at the word path.

Path means work. Climbing.

They're offering her a trailhead here, and she's not quite sure she's in hiking form.

"Is there a deadline on the completion of this path?" She asks carefully, trying to tune all of that Hiccup-type doubt out of her voice and mostly succeeding.

She's glad she didn't bring him, in the end. He wouldn't have been able to take this guy seriously, and would have spent the whole meeting alternating between biting his tongue and saying things that he shouldn't.

"We're hoping by the end of the year," he offers, leaning a little closer. "But the Rocky Mountain High half marathon is in September this year, and they're adding a professional division."

September feels like next month. Five months is suddenly nothing, condensing in front of her as pre-race jitters sent her foot tapping with painful jolts through her knee.

"September?" She affirms and Mr. Ryan nods, peacable and anything but demanding. "Alright, September."

Because it's not like Astrid to turn down a challenge.

"I'm going to hand you the contract today," he offers her a thick stack of paper, held together with a nearly sprung paper clip. "No rush on this, we'll want to have a second meeting sometime in the next couple of weeks. Here's my card, if you have any questions, feel free to send me an e-mail."

"Alright," she takes the paper, thumbing the edge and guessing there's at least twenty pages of single spaced font here. She'd be asking Gerard to borrow his fine toothed comb if she hadn't already torched that bridge for the moment.

She has to fix that.

She can fix all of this.

The entire right side of her body tries to twitch in pain as her foot bumps against a support bar on the floor that's holding up half the table. She can tell which half by the way it shakes and trembles, and she wonders if her own partial collapse is as obvious. The man across from her appears to remain oblivious, tucking a now mostly empty envelope into his briefcase and standing up, almost forcing Astrid to take her cue and do the same.

Her knee quakes and she stands solid on her left foot, shaking his hand again.

This is manageable. Really.

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**So, Jerry trying to parent, Ruff, and Nike. A lot happening here.
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**I'm so excited to hear what you guys think about what's happening with Nike here. Because a few of you have sniffed around it, but the result is getting a bit clearer with this installment. **

15. Chapter 15

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Hiccup picks up on the second ring, and her sigh is textbook relief.

"Hey," she greets, sitting down too hard on her campus issue chair and wincing as it digs into her lower back. "Hey."

"What's wrong?" He laughs nervously at her anxious tone and she clears her throat, pushing her bangs back from her face and sighing. Somehow she doesn't think his relief will last very long into the conversation, but it doesn't mean she can just stop.

"Nothing," she mutters, shifting on an achy, tired knee and leaning her forehead onto an open palm. "I meanâ€¦" It's suddenly too simplistic and snarled, and she shouldn't have called him in the first place. Everything is stillâ€¦dented from the other night. "I met with Nike today andâ€¦"

"And?" He sounds interested. She knows that he's not going to leave this alone and that's somehow comforting enough that she puts off an uncomfortable apology, waiting for the question. It feels better if he's chasing it, intrigued past the edge of that likely hovering anger. "How did the meeting go?"

"It wentâ€¦" she frowns, that thick contract heavy on her mind. "It went alright, definitelyâ€¦it seems achievable."

"You don't sound sure about that."

She sets her jaw and sighs, wishing she could look at him, read those minute expressions around the corners of his eyes, written in freckles. Is he upset? Is he hopeful, like her? Does he wish that she called earlier?

She does. She wishes she weren't worrying about 'should' and were just calling because she wants to. She wishes she hadn't left like that, that she'd stopped and talked andâ€¦

It wouldn't have helped. They don't think that she can do this, they think that this is desperate and daft and pathetic. They're wrong, and she hates watching Hiccup be so wrong.

"I'm completely sure," she nods resolutely to herself and Hiccup presses the phone harder against his face with a rustle of static. She wishes she could grab his hand or punch his arm, anything to touch him and make sure he's listening to what she's saying this time instead of focusing on her safety like that's enough for their happiness. "It's very achievable. They want me to run a race in September."

"September?" He asks, skeptical enough to bring back that flow of nausea that makes her feel like she's already staring down the starting line, feeding on the energy around her. "That's five months from now."

"I can count." She snaps, scowling at her feet and searching for that telltale swelling that would prove the weakness she can hear him suspecting.

"Astrid," he warns calmly, sighing at the end of her name like she's an exasperating toddler.

She resents that tone more than he can imagine, resents being treated as some sick pet who won't stay kenneled. All that Hiccup type freedom impossibly connected with the last four years feels damp and withered and she swallows hard, gritting her teeth.

"I'm reading through the contract," her hand finds her temple, rubbing at it with stiff fingertips. "Thrice."

"Good," his palpable relief is as insulting as it is comforting and Astrid's frown deepens.

"Well, if you don't trust me, why don't you come up and read the thing?" She snaps, shockingly successful through her anxiously belittled brain and she can hear Hiccup backing away from the phone, see him looking at her critically, like she requires a calibration.

She does, it just involves sleeping and running.

It's not going to happen for her if she doesn't start, is it?

"When do you have to sign it?"

"Soon."

"I can come up tomorrow night and read it," and the offer isn't quite a relief, more affirming everything she's fearing with one fell swoop. "If you want."

"I can read it myself."

"I'd feel better if I knew what you're getting yourself into."

"You act like this is some sort of childish escapade," she doesn't know what else to call it. He's acting like she just proposed some grandiose plan to build something and she doesn't know what she's getting herself into. Like it's somehow his job to dig her out. Like she needs the help.

She needs to prove it to him more than anyone.

"I know it isn't childish."

Bull shit.

"You've always been a horrible liar," she mutters into the phone, continuing before he has a chance to answer her. "Come up tomorrow. Maybe I'm missing that clause where I sell my soul to the devil."

"I'll see you around four tomorrow?" It's not even really a question and she considers teasing that he's inherited more of his father's steely command than he'd ever admit. The thought of Gerard makes her sick in a way that she doesn't want to register.

"Yeah, I'll see you then."

And the heavy pit of her excitement feels momentarily worse than being coddled.

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Hiccup waits outside Astrid's dorm building, warm in the direct spring sun and wishing she'd come downstairs already. He missed her more than he would have thought, spending far too much time worrying about her and her knee as separate entities, hoping that she's holding together and being safe above all else. It's not like her to lie down and sit still and she doesn't seem to fully understand that under all that strength and former speed she's human and hurt. She needs time to heal like everyone else.

And at home, it seemed like she was finally getting that, much to Hiccup's relief. Sure, she was upset about gaining weight and feeling like someone far less capable than her usual self, but she'd stopped stomping her good foot when the stairs were difficult to climb or staring at him morose when he took Spike on a long walk to try and tire her out.

He wants to be mad about the other night, about her yelling at his dad and choosing to leave rather than stay, but he's starting to think that he handled everything wrong.

If he's completely honest with himself, he hasn't exactly minded her being home, and while of course he loathes the fact that she's hurt, having her stationary has been an odd treat. Like all the best parts of their last semester of high school, spending time together while they worked, chatting idly and just knowing everything going on with each other. He hates that so many of their conversations involve catching each other up on the insignificant, everyday details that are so missed by being apart. He wants to know what she had for breakfast, or how she did on her test, how long she studied and how long some apparently obnoxious paper took for her to write. He really wants to know all of those little bits of her life, but it's so much more succinct having them occur right under his nose, rather than hunting them down.

And then they're hanging up the phone, and it's past midnight and she's exhausted while he still has work left to do.

It's not like that while she's at home, it's comfortable like

everything used to be, like it should be. Every time they're apart, it just reinforces the reality that she's supposed to be with him. Nothing else makes sense. It's that same awkward silence as when he stays in the library to work and feels incomplete without big black paws curled around his feet. Half of his thoughts filter into that nearly automatic stream connecting him to Toothless's brain and the other half need Astrid.

Even if she yells at his dad.

Not that he isn't peeved about that. It feels like a blooming fissure, a crack somewhere in a windshield that's spreading towards the passenger side, off cant and almost harmless. But it could split, it could fork and weave onto the driver's side, suddenly staring him in the face when it's too late to have it filled and the entire panel needs to be replaced.

Luckily for his nerves, they pretty much learned their lesson about festering fights and middling secrets years ago, and with everything deep and dark in the open, nothing has really seemed worth keeping dreadfully private since. Astrid called to tell him about her meeting, even though he could hear the trepidation in her voice.

She knew he'd pick up on it, she knew he'd see that she's not quite sure, not quite committed, but she still told him.

They'll talk about his dad tonight.

They'll talk about how Spike is still upset from Astrid's exit, and she really needs to come home and comfort the haggard pit.

They'll talk. They'll resolve it.

Honestly, the most nervous he's been in years was when she sent him off on a bet, because that seemed wily, out of character and brash. Suddenly their relationship was malformed, a funhouse reflection of the stability that he's used to, and he worried about the continuity. Her jealousy mended that almost instantly, the desire to wipe it from his mind and keep him close comforting and oddly amusing in equal parts.

They know that this isn't fragile anymore, but there's something about treating it as such that makes it stronger.

If they both keep fighting for what they already have, it can't really dissolve.

"Hey," Astrid's voice echoes unexpectedly over his shoulder after a few minutes and he turns to see her approaching a little more quickly than she has been, legs bare under her tightly strapped brace. "Sorry, I keep forgetting I walk slower," she frowns briefly at the admission, ambling past him to swipe her student ID across the sensor and unlock the door. A strong, lean arm yanks it open and she hops over the barrier on a good foot, holding the door wide for him.

"It's alright." He can't help but return the expression as she smiles almost meekly over her shoulder at him, leading him down the hallway with a slightly lopsided sway of her hips. "No crutches?"

"I'm coming back from the gym," she shrugs, pointedly nonchalant, and his eyes catch on the gym shorts that are still tight across her rear.

He should keep his eyes up and away from that if they're going to actually talk.

"How is that going?" He asks, trying to keep his voice leading and calm, and she shrugs, pulling up short at her door with a stabilizing hop on her good foot.

"Absolutely fine," she stares at the door in front of her, reading so much doubt into his too peaceful voice that it could smother her. He thinks she's going to go home and sit down again, feeble and still. She's so close to fine, it's like she can almost reach out and grab it. "Down to 111 as of this morning."

His eyes flit down again and he concludes that her new curves haven't gone anywhere. He swallows hard and shoves itchy palms into his pockets, clinging to today's purpose with all the sensible parts remaining in his frontal lobe.

"How does it feel?"

"It's fine," she snaps, biting her lip and searching his face for anything doubting as she pushes her door open. "I meanâ€¦I don'tâ€¦" "It's not perfect," she admits too quietly, walking inside and sitting on the edge of her bed with a hiss at the shallow knee bend. "It's sort of sore, but it really is starting to feel stronger."

He nods and glimpses down at the injury, where she has an ace bandage wrapped around under the scaffolding of her brace, and he's glad that she's being careful to support it.

"It'll take time."

"I know it will," she rolls her shoulders and leans back onto her hands, kicking her good foot against the base of her bed for a quiet, awkward moment. "So, do you want to see the contract?"

"Erâ€¦yeah," he shrugs, staring purposefully at the bed beside her before sitting down, the points of their hips touching. She reaches across him, ponytail tickling his chin, and pulls a thick stack of small font covered papers off of her desk, flipping through them to get back to the front page.

"Here," she almost hands the stack over before frowning and opening it past the first few dense sheets of paper. "The first ten pages are just Nike stuff, just company wide things."

"What kind of things?"

"The usual, I guess. Like I can't take any personal photos in the gear and I can't sign with anyone else during the contract," she shrugs, glaring up at his skeptical face. "You can trust me on those. They're completely general, the specific stuff starts here," she points a long tan finger towards the top of a paragraph halfway down the second column of the page, resting her chin comfortably on Hiccup's shoulder and wrapping her other arm around his waist.

It's more normal than sitting across from each other in careful lack of contact and Hiccup relaxes into her touch, ducking his head and frowning at the tiny font before starting to read, finger tracing beneath the words to keep his place. She sighs and closes her eyes, side of her head resting against his ear as her fingers fiddle with the opposite side seam of his shirt, smoothing across the soft cotton that hints at the warm skin underneath.

Yes, she absolutely missed him.

She's missed him this whole time, ever since her knee hurt, really. She's missed his critical but generally appreciative eye, backing her up and keeping her honest, just like back when he used to check her science homework and her understanding with gently posed questions. She's been chronically searching for that feeling of partnership rather than this bizarre and uncomfortable caretaker/patient rapport that they've been practically forced to establish in recent weeks.

It all makes sense now, how angry he gets when she fusses over his leg, shoving her hands away and insisting that he can do it himself. In her defense, she was never quite as attentive as he's been—then again, if she were now presented with a chance to keep him in bed all day, she wouldn't exactly turn it down.

Maybe it's their current level of comfort with each other, that absolute understanding and comprehension of each other's ticks that makes this so easy for him and so incomprehensibly difficult for her. He knows that she likes her feet rubbed more than almost anything in the world, and that she hates sleeping in and losing half of her weekend, but when he helps her with these seemingly tiny things while she can't even climb the stairs without looking like a lopsided, gimpy donkey, it just adds to that feeling of debt.

When she took care of him, it was so comparatively impersonal, so oddly distanced because she could barely take the electricity of his skin under hers. Everything was new and strange, and the warmth that bloomed from their contact felt foreign and impossible, cruel in its forbidden temptation. Now there's none of that trepidation, and no matter how nice it is—the fact is that he's doing a better job than she did.

And she doesn't need it half as much.

Her knee is still there, lazy and unrecognizable compared to its former self, but it's supporting her, pushing forward at that slow, uneven pace. She can walk, she can stretch, she can trust her balance.

She doesn't need as much as he did, and she sure doesn't need more.

"It says that you can't train in anything but these new shoes," he points to a clause halfway down the second page and Astrid shrugs.

"That's kind of the point, isn't it?" She flips back to that first specific paragraph. "I wear the shoes, I get better, I prove the shoes work."

"What if they don't work?" He asks, turning to face her more fully. She sits up, hand slipping off of his side to rest on the bed behind his seat.

"I don't need them to work," she defends, "I'm going to get better on my own. It won't matter what shoes I'm wearing."

"But what if they make it worse?" He asks, flipping towards the end of the contract to the thinner pages holding detailed design drawings of the new recovery trainer, pointing towards the foam filler indicated at the arch of the shoe. "These are nothing like your current shoes, they have way more padding here."

"Well, they're supposed to be supportive."

"You're more flat footed than this," he narrows his eyes at the dimensions on the drawing, holding it closer to his face and trying to make sense of the odd font. Astrid's fist connects bluntly with his shoulder.

"I am not flat footed."

"I didn't say you were, I said you were more flat footed than this shoe," he bends over and grabs her good foot, quickly untying the shoelaces and tugging it off of her foot. The foam insole slides out easily enough into his hand and he holds it next to the drawing, comparing the well-worn shape to the proposed arch support. "See?" He sets the paper down on his lap and traces a finger across the divot left by the ball of her foot, assessing the angle left in the nearly broken down foam. "Your arch isn't this high, it's going to hurt your feet and make you run on your heels."

"My arch is plenty high, Hiccup," she yanks back the drawing and looks at it, glancing carefully at her sock covered foot out of the corner of her eye. "It justâ€¦it's a shoe. It's foam, it'll break down, so they're just making it super thick at first."

"But the arch of the shoe has a hard sole here," he points to a bolded line on the drawing, labeled with a word he recognizes as a higher density polyurethane. "Even if the foam wears down, it's not going to correctly fit your low arch."

"Stop saying that I have a low arch," she snaps, crossing her good foot across her lap and pulling off her sock. "It'sâ€¦my foot is completely normal, alright?"

"More normal than mine," he chuckles, mostly to himself, earning a glare and a sharp rap of her knuckles against his knee. His hand lands warmly against the ball of her foot and his thumb presses against the divot of her arch, "you don't pronate when you run or anything, so it's not a problem, but you have wider toes and a lower arch, which probably gives you better balance."

"Oh," she frowns at her foot, turning it slightly in his hand and ignoring the tickling sensation to stare intently at the bend of her toes. "How did you know that?"

"Musculoskeletal biomechanics," he answers with a shrug and a wry grin. "Apparently I dodged a bullet here," he pats his left knee, "that ankle was completely headed for arthritis."

"So lucky," she rolls her eyes. "So you really don't think that these shoes will work for me?" She asks cautiously, a bubble of doubt blooming in her chest.

"I thinkâ€¦I think that this is meant for people with compressed knee cartilage," he frowns at the drawing and his hand smooths up to probe either side of her good knee, "which would make your ankle rock back and your arch pull higher?" He cocks his head. "I guessâ€¦" Yeah, it'd tighten your Achilles tendon," he squeezes her heel and tugs gently, eyes imagining the unseen machinery and putting it together. "You don't have compressed cartilage though, your cartilage is fine."

"Thank you," she grins, oddly pleased before the reality of his statement rushes back at her. "What do you think I should do about the shoes?"

"Definitely try them on before you sign this," he nods resolutely, closing the contract and looking around the room, trying to figure out how to phrase the next part of his suggestion. "And you should ask my dad to look this over, he is the lawyer."

"I'm going to be a lawyer."

"And I'm going to be an engineer," he smiles to himself, "but chances are I'm wrong and you should still try the shoes on."

"Oh come on, you're probably right," she snips, crossing her arms and hunching forward enough that her tee-shirt rides up a couple of harmless inches in the back, showing that strip of creamy golden skin above her shorts. "Iâ€¦I shouldn't have yelled at your dad, I know that, justâ€¦I can do this."

"I didn't say you couldn't," he idly flips through the pages on his lap and finds the ominous date on the last page. "Butâ€¦Astrid, this says if you don't race in September, you void the contract."

"I know," she shrugs, feeling caught in some lie.

"And that you owe them lost costs," he scans more carefully for a number, "and it doesn't actually tell you how much that is."

"I know this."

"So you could end up paying them."

"I know, Hiccup," she snaps at him, arms hugged around her good knee as she glares at her bad one, wishing she'd melted into the ground. "I don'tâ€¦I can race in September. No doubt about it, alright? That's five months. People return to professional sports in six all of the time. It'll be almost six months since my surgery, and I'll be fine."

"How can you be so sure about that?" He asks and she shrugs.

"I have to, don't I? I don't really have any other choice right now."

"You have other choices."

"No, mooching off of you and your dad is not a choice," she frowns, resting her forehead on her knee. "Justâ€¦I can do this, can't you trust that I can do this?"

"I don't want you to hurt yourself," he admits too quietly, and the pain in her knee, still inflamed from her workout, is all of a sudden pertinent and stagnant in the front of her mind.

"I won't."

"Not on purpose," he reaches out and grabs her hand, squeezing it gently and reinforcing that dangerously comforted wariness. "But you're used to being healthy."

"That's not a bad thing."

"I didn't say that it was," Hiccup defends, tugging her hand gently towards his lap. "Iâ€¦I don't like it, but I understand that you want to train here, but you have to promise me that you're going to go easy."

"I'll train howeverâ€¦" she starts flippantly before sighing and deflating under than concerned grip. "Ok. I'll start slow."

"That's the best I'm going to get, isn't it?" He grins at her quietly and she unfolds, sitting straight and shrugging with one shoulder.

"Probably," a smile leaks through the cracks and she nudges him with her shoulder, "how have you been?"

"Alright," he minces because it somehow feels wrong to jump into talking about his father and Spike. He should get a little further from the mad, shouldn't he? "I've got to get my final project in on Friday."

"Was my edit ok?" She checks because she never really got a chance to follow up with him after she returned her comments on Sunday afternoon.

"Yeah, thanks for that, it's way more readable," he nods, eyes lost in that far off world of CAD and bolts. "I think Thuggory and I have all the parts together now, it's just assembling them."

"Spending a lot of time with Thuggory then?" Astrid's voice comes out unnaturally high, snippy and haggard around the edges.

"I guess," Hiccup shrugs. "But he's always around this much close to finals, waiting for me to save him."

"Sounds like you two are having fun."

"Not really, it's mostly yelling at the printer, honestly. That thing can smell my fear."

"Lots of unwinding," she prods, scooting an inch away from him to give herself space and immediately feeling strange without his warmth pressing against her side. "I take it you guys have been taking breaksâ€¦" she blinks at him forcefully, coy game suddenly strange

and uncomfortable. "Any more visits to the bar?"

"What?" He sits up straight, taken aback by the question. "No, Astrid, I haven't developed a bar habit in the last three days."

"Ok then," she bites her lip, banishing that sudden but powerful image of Hiccup surrounded by _exotic_ women in a smoky bar.

"So while I've been worried aboutâ€|nyeh," he gestures between them with emphatic hands and she hardens her brow, "you've been thinking I was out at a bar or something?"

"Just the other night," she hedges, exhaling pointedly. "The other night must have been an eye-opener, and then I was allâ€|we didn't talk for a couple of days," she skirts the important issue to feed the green eyed monster. "I figure a repeat might have made you feel better."

"Why would a repeat of that nightmare make me feel any better?" He has the audacity to laugh, cheeks tinged pink. "Because I completely love being horribly embarrassed."

"I'm just saying that you didn't have any issues with theâ€|ladies."

She's never felt more like Hiccup as that last stilted word leaks through her lips.

"I had plenty of issues with the ladies," he snorts, adorable and undignified. "They were terrifying, and aggressive, and I think they were speaking in some sort of codeâ€|"

"They liked you."

"I can't imagine why," and he's so honest that she can't find anything angry in his words, anything to expound upon.

"Because, you're not seventeen and scrawny anymore." Her voice drops, quiet and nervous as the thoughts in the back of her mind materialize into solid words she can't take back. "And all those women are out there being new and interested."

"Are youâ€|are you really worried about that?" He asks, grinning slowly, expression wary on his face.

"Yes, Hiccup, I'm worried about that. I'm the only girl you've ever _kissed_ and now there are random women writing phone numbers on your hands." At least the ink has faded by now, no hastily scrawled heart playing connect the dots with the freckles on his hand.

"I didn't want her number."

"Stop smiling," she snips, crossing her arms and staring straight across the room at Ruff's unmade bed. "This isn't something _smiley_."

"Are you jealous? Again? Over something that happened days ago?" His smile is so wide it's nearly painful, canines a little asymmetrical on either side of gapped front teeth.

"Yes, Hiccup, I'm jealous. Obviously."

"I'm not repeating that any time soon," he says emphatically, fingers long and lanky, clamping nervously over the caps of his knees. "It was horrible. Really. I'm much better with the flirting when it's all canines and kisses." He pauses to slowly wrap an arm around her shoulders. "I did spend a long afternoon at the shelter on Monday, there's a Rottweiler that reminds me so much of Spike. Except she has this snaggletooth," he juts his upper teeth out over his lower lip and chomps slightly to show the expression.

"You can't brush this off that easily."

"You think I'm _hot_, I'm not brushing that off."

"Of course I think you're hot," Astrid rolls her eyes, face hot and itchy in the quiet. "You already knew that."

"But you think I'm so hot that other girls are going to be trying to swoop me." The silence is uncomfortable from Astrid's end and she frowns. "I'm taking it as a compliment, really."

"It's not a compliment. It'sâ€¦I'm worried. What if you want _that_?"

"What if I want to go be a womanizer?" He laughs at that, genuine and sweet. "I don't."

"You've never even thought about it."

"Exactly, it hasn't been worth thinking about," his soft smile is oddly placating and she returns the expression, hand sliding slowly to rest on his thigh. "I've got you."

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**So, we have an awkward reconciliation and talk about that Nike contract. Oh, and Hiccup unaffected by the fact that he's a hottie with a body that all the ladies want. Because that's not his style.
**

**Now, I'm sure that all of you have a lot of thoughts about all of this, even if the thoughts are that you're bored, and I want to hear all that so that I can fix it and keep this moving in the right direction, so tell me! I'd love to talk about any of this with you, but I can't if you don't review! **

**Thanks, and I'll see you on Thursday! **

16. Chapter 16

**And this week the big guns come out. **

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"Oh my god," Ruff bursts into the room, stretching long arms over her head and slumping into the shadows. Astrid glares up from her too comfortable roost tucked into the nook of Hiccup's body, head on his still slightly bony arm. "It's hot as balls out there."

"Do you have to be so loud?" Astrid snaps and Hiccup's arm tightens around her waist as he shrinks back from the light flicking on above them and Astrid reaches out to pause the movie.

"Didn't realize I was barging in onâ€¦" Ruff pops onto her tip toes, leaning to peer at the blanket covered gap between them. "Fully clothed _cuddling_. With Hiccup. Who I didn't know was visitingâ€¦"

"Fully clothed cuddling and a movie," Astrid amends, tone warning Ruff to be quiet as she presses her back further against a suspiciously quiet Hiccup's chest. Her foot curls lightly around his shortened leg and she debates whether or not to reach under the bed and grab his leg before deciding against it and giving him partial privacy behind her. "Do you mind?" She waves her roommate aside and tries to peer around her at the TV. "We're almost to the good part."

"Fine, I'll give you half an hour for your PGâ€¦whatever," she scoffs, grabbing some clothes out of her dresser with unnecessary force. "I'm sweaty anyway." She raises an eyebrow at Astrid before heading to the bathroom, letting the door slam behind her.

"So we've got a few more minutes," Astrid laughs, rolling onto her back and absently hitting play on the TV's ancient, dust-encrusted remote control. "Thanks for staying for a while."

"Yeah," he smiles, reaching over her stomach and under the edge of the bed to retrieve his leg. "I was sort ofâ€¦I meanâ€¦"you should come home just for the night," he blurts, sitting and pushing the blanket off of his lap far enough to strap his prosthetic back on.

"I thought we agreed that I was going to train here," she frowns, carefully lowering her knees over the side of the bed with a hiss, cringing as her toes reluctantly accept the carpet beneath them.

"Just for the night," he suggests, and years ago she would have been proud of just how little it sounds like pleading. "You leftâ€¦"

"Yeah, I know, I left," she cuts him off, wiping an urgent hand over her forehead and pressing her fingers against her eyelids. "It wasn't my best moment, but I did it."

"You should come home," he urges, wiggling his knee and trying to get comfortable in the hastily strapped leg. "Talk to my dad, talk to Spikeâ€¦"

"I can't right now, Hiccup."

Her knee stiffened up during their almost nap and it feels rickety, unreliable and older than the rest of her by at least a few decades.

"A night."

"I have a nine o'clock class tomorrow. You have school. Tonight won't

work," she snips, easing onto the full pads of her feet and bracing some of her weight onto the ground. She should take the ace bandage off and check on it, shouldn't she? It feels worse today since yesterday, even though Monday felt alright.

She needs to get better about wearing her brace to class, even though it kills her to make eye contact with able bodied students. It feels like broadcasting some fundamental failure, a flaw that's been lurking under her surface, disguised for her entire life. She's had secrets before, even secrets from herself, harbored under thick skin against a stoic heart, but nothing has ever exploded in front of the whole world like this before.

Even Hiccup feels oddly public at the moment, personal connection drowning in a sea of muted, shame faced pain.

She probably looks a whole lot like Hiccup did those first few weeks after his leg, frustrated and silent as just wrong prosthetics gripped at the still healing wound.

The expression on her face suddenly makes no sense to her and she forces the muscles placid.

"This weekend?" It's not really a question, closer to that intermediate commanding tone that he's developed in the last few years to walk that line between appeasing her need to choose and his need for her decisions to tend in a certain direction.

"Yeah. Maybe Friday night."

"Just Friday?" This question is horribly hopeful, almost needy in the air behind her.

"I need the ice bath here."

"We can fill my tub with ice." We, we, we. He's so insistent on being a part of this, so sure that he's already involved, already crucial that there's nothing wrong with sticking his big head into the middle of her training.

"I don't need your help to fill a bathtub with ice."

"It'll go faster with two people carrying buckets," he shrugs, gentle hand landing against her shoulder as the movie ends, flicking to the credits beyond their caring.

"I needâ€"here. I need _here_, alright?" She snaps, resisting the urge to shove off his hand with every stubborn fiber in her body.

"My dadâ€" "

"Yeah, I get it. I have a week long apology ahead of me." His hand slips off of her shoulder, coasting down her back and highlighting those two melted pounds in the electric blips of her ribcage.

"That's not what I was going to say."

"I'll call him and apologize, alright? I feel like enough of an ass

without you nagging me about it."

"You're stressed," he mollifies, arm warm and solid three inches from her back, distracting like she's not supposed to touch him.

"Yes. And I can handle it."

"I know you can handle it." His confidence makes her knee throb, protesting as she curls her toes in on themselves and clenches, stretching those angry, sore tendons feeding from the back of her calf through the tarnished joint.

"Are you staying tonight?" She peeks over her shoulder at him with reluctantly hopeful eyes before glancing towards the bandage between her brace that is starting to feel restrictive. "We could get breakfast."

"I don't have class until ten," he shrugs and it earns a slight smile. "I can't believe cramming together on your twin will be any better than my bed at home, but I'll stay."

"My knee is doing betterâ€"I mean, I can lay flat on my back now. It's wonderful," she amends her first statement when it feels fake on her tongue, like accidentally mixing a blue sweetener packet into iced tea when she meant to reach for white. "We'll fit. It's not like you take up much room."

"Hey, you're no wide load yourself." She smiles at the sentiment, even though it doesn't feel quite honest. He likes these strange new curves, these parts of her that feel foreign and obstructive when she exercises or tries to squeeze into clothes that don't fit how they used to.

"I'll kick Ruff out when she gets back then," Astrid glances down at his foot, somehow not caring that it's dusty sole is resting against her comforter, a dusky gray square lingering in its shadow. "So we can get comfortable."

He grins a little too broadly, eyebrows raising towards his hairline and compressing freckles in a way that shouldn't be so inherently appealing.

"Comfortable?" Part of her wants to balk against the boyish excitement. It feels like it's betraying the serious man that just tried to lecture her about her personal relationships, an inner child taking over at the entirely wrong time, focusing on the playboys behind the counter rather than the robbery at the register.

The rest of her is giddy, wondering how long Ruff is going to be in the shower, and wishing for more time than that.

"Obviously, I was just talking about your leg, you know. Nothing more comfortable than taking it off," her grin is positively wicked. "My knee feels better when I sleep in a parka."

"Of course it does," Hiccup rolls his eyes. "Shame I left my chastity belt at home, that really helps the REM set in."

"Well, it's probably a good thing, I...um," she glances at her lap and back to his eyes. "The test was right, we're safe in that

department."

"Great," he smiles and his hand lands warm and comforting on her thigh.

Neither of them decide to lean in, it's one of those things that just happens, falling together as she leans back on a palm and her other hand finds his too long hair, twisting in the strands and trying to line their mouths up without too much effort. His lips capture hers with a laugh that reverberates somewhere in her chest, drowning out that awkwardly timed knee throbbing and joining with her accelerated heartbeat as his hand lands warm and solid against the small of her back. She leans back into his touch, tongue sneaking out to toy with his, slow and warm and oddly breathless despite that constant familiarity, the welcome and amazingly _normal_ slip of his fingers under the hem of her shirt.

He's touching her like he always does, cautious and confident, waiting and listening as his mouth starts to move faster against hers, talented like she's not the only woman that he's ever kissed. He's touching her like she's not broken or worth worrying about, like she's as self-sufficient and durable as she's always been, and it's exactly what she needs.

Her hand fists in the front of his shirt and she nearly growls against his tongue, tugging him down further as he laughs, hand landing on her thigh above her brace.

Two things happen at once.

His fingers dig in a little too close to that bandage, that sore, swollen epicenter that her mind is fighting so hard to escape from and she flinches away from his mouth, nose bumping against his in the wake of the almost embarrassing wet pop. The door opens and closes beside them and Ruff saunters in, toweling her long hair over her shoulder and cocking her hip.

"Soâ€|PG-13," she comments, hanging her from its hook and grinning in the face of Astrid's half-disappointed scowl. Hiccup pulls his hand from his girlfriend's thigh, too smug to be truly sheepish and Astrid breathes a sigh of relief as her knee relaxes out of the zone of accidentally glancing blows. "Better, but I wouldn't have minded walking in on some sweet, sweet soft serve," she shrugs like it's a challenge and Astrid rolls her eyes, rocking onto stiff feet and grimacing as she ambles aimlessly to her closet, trying to cool down everything that Hiccup left warmed without being too painfully obvious.

"You couldn't handle it," she grins, far more flippant than she really feels as her body complains. The heated ache that sends her glancing towards an insufficiently shamed Hiccup on the bed is familiar, but the throb in her knee still sends her off kilter, like a feisty but trusty confidant run awry.

Finding the Iago in her midst.

"How's the knee today?" Ruff asks, grin fading to a genuine friendly concern as her eyes flick down to the real reason for Astrid's strange, lopsided stiffness. "You have it twice wrapped?"

"Yeah, it felt soft earlier," Astrid shrugs, pushing her bangs behind her ear and pulling a sweatshirt over her head for lack of anything else to do. Hiccup looks mildly disappointed out of the corner of her eye and she does her best to ignore the sudden confusion in the pit of her stomach when she wonders how they leapt into joking around from bickering, and if she had any say.

Is it worse if he steered her, or if she veered off course without noticing?

How much of her steel has she lost to the apparently spreading rust of her injury?

"Soft?" Ruff prods at the bruise, just callus enough to be spurring. "Did you up your mileage yesterday?"

"Yes, I did," Astrid rolls her eyes and turns to sit back on the foot of the bed, Hiccup's prosthetic chilled and heavy behind her. "I did six."

"Six?" Hiccup interjects, and she can practically hear his furrowed brows. "You were doing one at home."

"I need to get back in shape." Her shrug is an admission of guilt that she didn't realize she was clinging to and she sits up straighter. "It's not just I'm getting fast."

"How fast?" Ruff checks, slipping her feet into flip flops like the generous roommate that she is, planning to leave them alone. "Like, Astrid Hofferson fast, or just faster than a crippled tortoise?"

The question stings more than it really should.

"I've never even ridden a bike like this before," she feels young and inexperienced in a way that's absolutely unsettling. "How fast is fast?"

"I don't know," Ruff pats her pockets, checking for keys and phone. "You should probably look into that though."

"Does it matter?" Astrid asks, backpedaling slightly with her fingers white knuckled on the edge of her footboard. "I'm not going to be racing on a stationary bike."

"I figured you still wanted to be fast."

The other girl's shrug is more insulting than the dismissive statement. The footboard creaks under Astrid's fingers.

"I'll look it up. Probably a good idea," she admits, too quietly, immediately feeling chastised in a way that makes her deeply uncomfortable.

"You don't have to be fast," Hiccup's gentle hand on her shoulder makes it worse and she tenses under his fingers. "Not yet."

"What does that bruise look like today?" Ruff pointedly ignores Hiccup's comment, cocking her head and glancing towards the brace even through Astrid's piercing glare.

"Fine." She snips through gritted teeth, ignoring Hiccup's eyes boring through the back of her skull.

"Bruise?"

"She's got a bruise blooming on her knee, it's fine," Ruff shrugs it off like it's nothing and Astrid swallows back this resurgence of her original fear upon seeing the blackish blue smudge around her knee-cap. "Probably part of the healing or something."

"Have you called your doctor?" Hiccup asks urgently, swinging both legs surprisingly gracefully over the side of the bed and touching the clasp of her brace with gentle fingers.

"No," she looks anywhere but at him, making tense eye contact with Ruff as he unbuckles the brace and slides it too gently down her shin, awakening that harried throb at the sudden lack of support around the joint. "Come on, it's fine, Hiccup. Just don'tâ€"dammit," she curses, afraid to slap his hands away and risk hitting herself as he grabs the end of the ace bandage and unwraps it, revealing a noticeably larger bluish stain on her skin. "See? It's fine."

As if that would work, in any universe.

"Astrid, this isn't fineâ€" "

"It's a bruise. It's blood draining from the jointâ€" " She hates how she sounds on the defense, harried and anything but collected.

"There shouldn't be blood anywhere near thisâ€" "

"Hiccup," Ruff cuts him off, exasperated and sounding as if something crucial has snapped in her already limited patience. "She's a big girl. It's a bruise. She's fine."

"Thatâ€" " He glances towards the knee, gulping a little nauseous at the throbbing purple entity, around the size of a generous baseball, curving under her kneecap, menacingly intimate with her joint.

"It's a bruise," Ruff repeats and Astrid glares at the middle of the floor, angry with the tingling skin above her kneecap, behind the program and entranced with the gentle, trembling contact of Hiccup's fingers. "It'll stop spreading soon."

"She's right," Astrid nods curtly, chewing on the tender inside of her cheek. "It's a part of the healing, I've had worse."

"Right, you've healed from invasive knee surgery dozens of times," Hiccup rolls his eyes and wraps a possessive, attempted calming arm around her back. "You need to call your doctor."

"No," Ruff shakes her head, looking shockingly sternly at Hiccup, less brash and more force of nature. "No, she doesn't need to call her doctor. She is fine, and I'm sick of you moping over her when she's fine. Look at her!" The tall girl gestures broadly at Astrid, who is still preoccupied glaring at the floor and flinching away from Hiccup's coddling arm.

"I'm not moping over herâ€" " Hiccup rejects her statement, trying

to maintain focus on Astrid, who's having none of it, stiff and perched on the extreme edge of the bed.

"Come on, you look like a sad puppy," Ruff rolls her eyes, taking a step towards Hiccup and looming over him in a way that feels a little too like bullying. He stands, hand sliding off of the point of Astrid's shoulder with a mixture of relief and sudden, inexplicable loneliness. "Oh, look at that, a standing sad puppy. It's like a trickâ€œ"

"Ruff," Astrid warns, voice low and tired, not as loud as she wants to be.

"No, I'm just wondering what he's going to do next," Ruff crosses her arms and turns to face Hiccup squarely. "You've already taken all that fight out of your girlfriend. She's been sitting here bellyaching about doing too much, instead of going for it."

"She's trying not permanently mess up her knee," Hiccup defends, confident and not quite as calm as he usually is in the face of similar confrontation.

"She's scared," Ruff sneers, lip curling above a slightly snagged canine. "I've never seen her scared to run, or scared to work before and the only thing holding her back here is your advice. You're telling her that she can't do anything and that she needs to sit still and be quiet." Astrid's jaw drops and an unhealthy shade of crimson rises into Hiccup's cheeks. "Don't like that, do you? Because I know that you love her, I know that you do, but you're treating her like she's someone else. Like she's some fragileâ€œ"

"Shut up, Ruff," Hiccup cautions, voice dark like the time some well-wishing busybodies called animal control on Toothless for napping in the front yard.

"What? You don't like me pointing out that you don't know your girlfriend? That you're holding her back?"

"Ruffâ€œ" Astrid stands on her single good foot, fists clenching unevenly by her sides. Hiccup steps forward, left foot boldly in front rather than lurking as usual behind flesh and bone.

"Because that's what's happening now, Hiccup," Ruff continues, ignoring Astrid in a way that makes her want to believe that something is in fact holding her back. She knows it's not Hiccup, and she hates whatever is keeping her silent and still. She's afraid that she'd lose if she were to slug Ruff now, and the idea that she might need Hiccup to back her up is terrifying. "You were so good for her when you guys first met. She was louder and nicer and more confident in her amazing personality rather than her looks. It was wonderful. But now she'sâ€œ|fading. You're holding her back, with the rules and the vanilla ass boring sex, and this life where you want her to be safe and slow and talking to your wolf in a dark basementâ€œ"

"Shut up," Hiccup growls and Astrid turns to stare at glowering eyebrows, knitted low over narrowed green eyes. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Ruff, seriously," Astrid hobbles forward, foot dragging slightly below that swollen, purple knee and Hiccup snaps entirely at the

leaning, hopping motion.

"Astrid, sit down," he almost pleads, voice still dark, but overlaid with anxious worry. Astrid listens, because she doesn't want him to sound like that, so raw and worried and stressed about her of all things.

He wants to take care of her, and Ruff is wrong.

"See? Ordering her to sit, and she listens?" The still standing girl scoffs, crossing her arms and looking at Astrid, genuinely sad. "I don't like seeing her soâ€¦"

"I sat because I wanted to," Astrid defends her own motives.

"Have you been hypnotizing her?" Ruff guffaws, arms falling defiantly slack at her sides. "Because that's the only way I'm hearing thisâ€¦"

Hiccup's fist collides with Ruff's eye before he really calculates its trajectory and he winces at the contact, shaking his hand out as it unfolds back at his side. Ruff stands stunned, cheekbone already pink and shiny under the fluorescent light as her lip pulls back fully into a snarl and she surges forward, slugging Hiccup's jaw before he can react, knocking him back a stumbling step before a mean left hook connects with his lower stomach.

"Guys!" Astrid springs to her good foot, grabbing Hiccup's shoulder and shoving him back onto the bed with a surprising surge of balanced strength before stepping forward and grabbing Ruff's elbow halfway through her next swing, grunting as she absorbs the force in gym sore biceps. "Ruffâ€¦"

"Hiccupâ€¦he punched me," the girl stands up straight, smile more than a little insane. "He punched me. Heâ€¦"

"Ruff, get out of here," Astrid sighs, pointing towards the door and glancing back at Hiccup, who's still glowering and cradling his fist in a slightly trembling palm. "Like now."

"Nice punch," she rubs her eye, flinching at the touch of her fingers on the already swelling bruise. "Like ouch. Nice." She raises her hand towards Hiccup for a high five and Astrid's glare deepens.

"Out!" She repeats, shoving her roommate towards the door and staring until the latch clicks shut behind her.

"Iâ€¦" Hiccup starts behind her, pausing for lack of anything to say. "Her head is like an anvil."

"What?" Astrid turns, brows furrowed as her knee flashes back to the forefront of her mind, throbbing and too hot above her foot. Hiccup's eyes dart to the puce skin before staring back at his knuckles.

"I think I just punched a boulder. Do my knuckles look broken?" He asks, and he's grinning beneath nervous eyes, riding that post-fight adrenaline high that she misses more than she'd like to admit.

"You just punched Ruff," she blurts, laugh escaping from her throat

despite her best intentions. "In the face."

"Sit down, I need to wrap your knee back up," his smile drifts away, leaving that anxious shadow on his face. "You shouldn't be standing."

"I can stand," she insists before faltering and sitting down in her original spot, reaching out and taking his hand into her lap. "I think I need to wrap your hand."

"It's fine," he insists, good fingers touching oh so gently at the tender skin above her bruise.

"You sound like me." The joke takes a minute to sink in, but Hiccup laughs. "We're a mess."

"Fishlegs is going to kill me," he laments, face drooping and stilling. "Iâ€"she doesn'tâ€"

"She was out of line," Astrid agrees, running light careful fingers over Hiccup's swelling knuckles before looking up and cupping his overheated jaw with a careful palm. "Is your face ok? And she got your stomach pretty good thereâ€|"

"Yeah, I bit off a little more than I could chew, didn't I?"

"You got in a fight for me," she frowns. "With my roommateâ€|you didn't need to do that, I could have handled it," she balks hard and sits up away from him, knee twitching under his stubborn fingertips.

"She said I was holding you back," his voice catches heartbreakingly in the middle of his sentence and she swallows hard, picking up her bad leg and carefully laying it across his lap.

"Help me wrap it?" She hands him the bandage and bites her lip. "It hurts, I want to go to bed."

"Yeah, I don'tâ€"here," he starts wrapping her bruised leg, southpaw a bit slow on the uptake as he pulls the elastic comfortably snug against her skin. He clips it at the crest of her shin, fingers sliding down towards her foot and giving the joint some space. "Better?"

"It's alright," she shrugs, smiling in a way that she hopes is comforting. "Really, it's just a bruiseâ€|I'llâ€"I'll slow up tomorrow, alright? It just felt good this morning and I got carried away."

"I think you should come home," he nods, steely and confident and she avoids those blazing green eyes, firm and set on a goal.

"I can'tâ€" she pauses and looks towards his hands, towards his serious handsome face. "Let's just lay down, alright? I think I have a soda in the fridge that you can use to ice your jaw."

"Come on, I think I look rugged," he laughs, but it's nervous and she chews on her lip. "Ruff thinks I'm holding you back."

She should answer and say that he's not. He's not. She knows that

he's not. He's half the reason for her drive forward, what keeps her going when it's hard and reminds her what it's like to be striving.

Nothing surges to the tip of her tongue.

"Very rugged. You should get in fights more often." He's smart enough to clue on the avoidance and he stiffens against the mattress beside her, nervous. "Except work on that fist. You're going to break a finger."

"I do want you to run again, I just don't want you to hurt yourself," he presses forward and she bites her lip.

"Good thing I'm fine then, right?"

It's not a lie, but somehow it feels like one. It's just a bruise, isn't it?

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Astrid sips her coffee, staring at Hiccup's slightly swollen jaw across the table. It's blooming black along the crest, beneath a thin tract of auburn stubble, fading to green below his chin. She tells herself to remember not to let an angry, unhinged Ruff anywhere near her face.

"It doesn't look too bad. I'm glad she didn't aim for the nose, but I think you're alright."

Hiccup glances at his faded reflection in the restaurant window, wincing as he angles his neck to see the swelling better.

"That's going to be an absolute rainbow tomorrow," he grimaces, carefully touching his neck and turning back to the table to chug from his own coffee. This morning it seemed nearly impossible to crawl out of Astrid's warm bed, wooed into comfort by her bad knee elevated on his hips, arm curled across his chest. He'd missed sleeping together more than he'd really realized, and waking up pressed together in the small bed was better than any morning in weeks.

"Whatever you do, don't go telling people a girl punched you in the face," Astrid laughs lightly, setting her cup down. "And also don't say you started it."

"Right, Ruff Thorston isn't a defensive institution at my school," he shakes his head, looking up at her through his eyelashes and trying not to focus on the harried looking dark circles under her eyes. Bringing Ruff into this is innately uncomfortable, and those beneath the skin worried wounds sting. Ruff thinks he's bad for Astrid, and no matter how ardently he disagrees, the sudden lack of support in something that's always been positive is jarring. He thought Ruff was his friend. "Besides the leg, has everything been going alright?"

It's one of those sensitive, Hiccup-type questions that tear right through her, bumping against something deeper and making her feel absolutely seen. He can practically perceive the tears in her knee, the stitches and new made connections raw and pained like newly

knitted bones. She's happy, as always, that he's looking past skin deep, but not exactly elated about all the damage he's seeing.

"Fine," she shrugs, endlessly more at ease than she feels. "I'm honestly ahead work wise, but it's actually really nice being back in class. Makes me feel normal."

"Oh," Hiccup frowns, looking at his swollen, freckled hand in stark relief with the blue formica table top. "I'm glad for thatâ€¦.umm, then. Yeah."

"You don't sound particularly glad," Astrid observes, sitting up a little straighter and preparing herself for all those badly suspended issues to collapse back onto their heads.

She can feel a fight brewing, like stirring clouds lingering just behind the mountains and out of sight, still managing to dump moisture into the air and make Spike's heckles stand automatically on end. Between her lack of apology for running out, and the quiet, conspicuously clothed cuddling the night before, everything feels wrong and heavier than it should. Ruff was out of line, and Astrid knows this, but saying so feels like validating all of this coddling and protecting and padding.

She is fine. But there are millions of better ways Ruff could have said it.

"I think you need to come home," he glances down, like he has laser vision that can pierce the table and highlight that shiny, despicably necessary brace gripping her knee. It throbs under the casually obvious attention, a sharp twang of pain shooting down her calf and warming the tendons of her foot. "At least to see your doctor about...training."

He doesn't mention the bruise, and the lie feels worse than the ace bandage against her puffy, sensitive skin.

"My trainer signed off. I trust her." Her snipping tone attempts to close the door on this conversation but he plows forward, eyebrows knitted low and determined.

Goddamn him, pulling the handsome card. It has to be on purpose, doesn't it? Hiccup rarely looks at her so focused...well, unless he's _focused_.

She checks her watch, and he has class in an hour. No matter how much of a welcome relief this morning was, he needs to go, and she needs to set about patching up the last couple of days. She needs to call his dad, and apologize and explain. She needs to buy a longer ace bandage, because this knee feels like it's about to need a second layer of extraneous support.

She needs to talk to Ruff, and nag the other girl to apologize. She needs to patch that rift that's blooming from Hiccup's front and sealing from Ruff's, because for her roommate, a fight is over when the punches are.

"I don't think that much bruising is normal."

"It's _fine_." Astrid rejects the comfort, pressing her right heel into the ground and feeling the slowly blooming strength beneath the obvious pain. "I'm absolutely fine. It's a bruise."

The claim hangs awkwardly in the stilted, silent air between them, tinged with Ruff's tirade the night before. Astrid can't believe how far that went, how impossibly beyond friendly or supportive.

"You're _fine_?" He wants to ask her if she thinks Ruff is right, if her dodging insistence is some unsuccessful and unusually polite attempt to tell him to butt out.

It doesn't feel like that, necessarily, the heaviness in her face extends beyond a single bad night's sleep, and he wonders if it hurts. That would explain a lot, her quietness, her willingness to sit when he asks instead of making some show of pacing the room first with exaggeratedly even steps. He remembers the nagging pain in what's left of his shin, making him harried and difficult, mean in a way that Astrid was perfectly equipped to handle.

If it hurts, she needs to come home even more, and she'll be harder to convince.

"Completely," she insists with a careful smile, and it's almost enough to be convincing.

But what if she thinks Ruff is right?

The repetitive thought nags at the back of his brain, persistent like a sharp rock in the heel of a shoe on a long walk, digging in with every step only to be momentarily forgotten the moment the sole leaves the ground. What if Astrid feels held back? It's one of the sidelong benefits of going to different schools, living opposite and equally busy schedules that he doesn't have to wait for her to be done with practice, she's not leaving his warm bed for early morning runs. Even in high school, waiting for her was strange for both of them, and those first few weeks he was home, he remembers her worrying over missed miles when she thought he wasn't looking.

He remembers those years, staring at her from afar and thinking up reasons for their eventual impossibility that could drown out the budding and unhealthy hope. The athletic disparity always landed near the top of that list, a chasm that didn't seem important enough to really thwart anything, but crucial enough to make things harder. He doesn't know what it's like to have the post-workout petrified muscles inspire him back to his feet, he doesn't feel that twitching urgency to get up and move, more than content to sit for hours and get lost in designing or sci-fi.

He knows what it's like to have a leg taken by something, to have that always trusted stability yanked out from under him, but he has absolutely no understanding of what it's like to be a grounded athlete.

He imagines it's miserable.

But she does need to sit still and heal. He can't remember ever asking her to be quiet, aside from drug fueled embarrassment, but he wonders if they feel like the same thing. Astrid has always been loud in her motions, gracing newspapers and calling him in from a distance

with those strong legs and that unrelenting charge. It's how she communicates with the world, how she places herself and how she relates to the world around her.

He doesn't want to hold her back, or silence her. He could not care less about her running career, but he cares very deeply about her happiness, and he's not stupid enough to think that the two can be untangled.

"I don't want you to stop training, I just think you need to see your doctor," he tries a gentler approach, shrugging slightly and leaning in towards her. Her eyes narrow and she pushes her cup away, towards the erect menu of pie that she hasn't looked at once.

"Well, you don't need to lie to me."

"I'm not lying," he retorts, feeling trapped.

"It's obvious that you don't want me to do this," and her claws are coming out, protective and wary as blank checks swirl in the back of her mind like bad omens. "It's obvious that you don't think I should be training."

"I just said I didn't want you to stop training," he subconsciously lowers his voice on the last word and Astrid snorts.

"Right, you're whispering because you're so on board with the idea." She knows she's being too loud, but somehow it feels safer than arguing on even ground, quiet and polite. She doesn't want to be tricked into his passenger seat, driven to a doctor's office amid copious thank you's on her part, while he's just so goddamn willing to help with whatever she needs. "Look, Hiccup. I'll be home this weekend, Ruff will-"

"Because Ruff is such a huge proponent of this relationship," Hiccup rolls his eyes and Astrid stops, words hovering above the tip of her tongue before fading into oblivion. She sags into her seat, elbows hitting the table top a little too hard.

"What does any of this have to do with our relationship?"

It has been years since fights questioned the entity that is them, since anything seemed deadly or close to their core. It doesn't feel like that to her, not at all. They fight, it's what couples do, they disagree, and argue. And she and Hiccup are so stubborn, someone always ends up being right in the end, and she's more than willing to campaign for her side until she charges through that finish line in september and proves herself.

"Ruff seems to think it has something to do with us."

"I think that the real problem here is that Ruff thinks we have something to do with her," Astrid scoffs. "Last time I checked, I'm not dating Ruff."

"She's not my biggest fan all of a sudden," Hiccup shrugs, trying not to let those inadequate years creep into the back of his mind and failing miserably. "She's your best friend."

"She's my best female friend. There's a difference."

"Do you think she's right?" The question comes out as a challenge and Astrid's eyes narrow automatically, rising to the occasion before it's a conscious decision.

"Right about what?"

It seems like a perfectly reasonable question. She couldn't be less concerned about Hiccup holding her back, or their so called vanilla bedroom activities, but Ruff is absolutely on her side about the obvious state of this bruise.

Hiccup freezes and pushes his own mug away with shaking fingers, mouth mumbling something silent and ominous as his fingers grip the edge of the table, holding on like he's planning to launch himself backwards to the moon.

"You do think she's right, don't you?"

"About what?" Astrid repeats her question, perking up and looking wildly around the restaurant for the source of Hiccup's sudden disturbance. "I don't-"

"I couldn't hold you back if I tried," he snaps, scooting his chair back with a bumpy screech across the tile. "Not that I would ever-ever-try, but-" He wracks his brain for some sort of exit, some sort of path that will drill this through that too thick layer of tenacity and into her brain, and finds nothing. "Don't bother coming home this weekend, if it's such an issue for you. Keep training, maybe blue legs are faster."

"What?" Astrid tries to stand, tries to keep up with the whiplash inducing connections that Hiccup's mind appears to be drawing out in that speed of light space beyond her reach. As soon as half her weight braces against her bad knee it falters, dropping her backwards onto her chair with a frustrated growl. "Goddamnit."

"Yeah, I can see you're really..._fine_." He shakes his head, faltering slightly before walking away from the table, looking over his shoulder on the way out.

"Hiccup, come on," she calls after him, standing more slowly this time and hissing as her balance equalizes slowly compressing her swollen joint. He doesn't turn around, and the disappointment and confusion fades to blazing anger as she watches his car pull out of the parking lot and into traffic.

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**So, who else wants to punch Ruff? Because that wasn't quite enough Ruff punching in my humble opinion. Also, I want to hug Astrid so bad it hurts. **

**Tell me what you think about all the plot, and I'll be responding to last chapter's reviews presently! **

17. Chapter 17

**This is super late, I apologize. It is a doozy though, so be

excited. **

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Ruff comes back midmorning, hair frizzy with bedhead and eyes obviously still half asleep. She perks up slightly when she sees Astrid lying in bed, knee elevated on a pillow.

Astrid is punishing the pillow for smelling obnoxiously like Hiccup.

"I figured you'd be back home," the taller girl greets, emptying her keys and wallet from sweatpants pockets and sitting on the edge of her bed. Ruff's eye is swollen, cheekbone still pink and shiny while a purple bruise is blooming from the corner of her eye outward, dripping like ink across her tan.

"Nice bruise," Astrid snips, eyes glued to the paperback held six inches above her face.

"Where's Hiccup?" Ruff doesn't even have the sense to look sheepish, grinning at the prospect of complimenting him on the punch and seeing her own handiwork emblazoned across the young man's jaw.

"Home." Astrid's good foot taps irritably against the footboard. "Heâ€|" the sigh is short and labored, a lengthy expression jammed into half a second. "Gym?" She tosses the book onto the foot of her bed and sits up, pushing at first to her good foot then forcing herself to stand squarely with gritted teeth, ignoring the almost squishy tug and pull within her brace.

"Huh?" Ruff cocks her head, wincing as her lips pull at the swollen crest of her cheek.

"Do you want to go to the gym?" Astrid repeats, choking back everything that never finished snapping. Hiccup left. She's used to being the purveyor of closed doors, the one who steps away from a conversation rather than finishing it. He left and she doesn't have any concept of how to respond. "I'm sick of sitting around. I need to move this thing or it's going to turn to stone," she grimaces, shaking the joint until it feels like Styrofoam on fire, a napalm flange holding her leg together.

"I'm guessing Hiccup didn't leave on great terms then," Ruff can't manage the smug grin that she wants to, somehow, looking at Astrid's flushed and panicky face. "I was going to apologize and shit."

"You were?" She pauses in freaking out to quirk an eyebrow.

"For punching him," Ruff clarifies and Astrid spirals back into that quaky place.

As if punches were the real problem here.

"And no, he didn't leave on-No, I-" she huffs, stomping as best as she can over to her closet and pulling her running shoes out. "He just...I can't make him get it. He won't believe that this is supposed to hurt and bruise, and that I really couldn't care less that it does." Any mention of her pain and he's doctoring, gentle and insistent, treating the knee instead of the rest of her. Untying the

double knot in her laces from yesterday is a strange sort of victory and it drives her forward, like she's talking to a wall instead of the unexpected source of this stupid problem. "Does he think running 10 miles used to be fun? It's not like I haven't been dealing with this wonky knee for years. It's never been...pleasant, and it's not going to suddenly be a vacation."

"Sounds like you two had a wonderful morning, how does his jaw look?" Ruff asks with a chuckle and Astrid glares at her.

"Like hell. If you wouldn't spite kick me in the leg, I'd knock your teeth out," Astrid threatens mildly and Ruff actually does look slightly apologetic this time. "And it was an absolutely fantastic morning." Her laugh is a little too loud, a few steps past manic. "I'm trying to tell him that my knee is fine, and he gets all...conflicted and leaves, like it's some complicated issue. It's not." She seethes at the ground, sitting on her bed and struggling to shove her shoe over her good foot without yanking the laces loose entirely. "I mean, the whole damn issue is plenty complicated. He wants me to sit back while he and his dad pay for everything, and I'd never let that happen. I'd...fizzle."

She finishes a little too quietly and Ruff sits up straighter, wondering if she should say anything. Maybe she should assure Astrid that she wouldn't actually spite kick her in the leg, at least not while she's hurt.

Then again, she really doesn't want to have a missing canine in common with her brother.

"You...your trainer signed off on you racing in September," she finally offers after a long period of uncharacteristic dabbling mostly spent running her tongue over her teeth.

"He doesn't have issues with me racing in September," Astrid shrugs, deflated but still seething anger like a sponge. "He has issues with me getting in shape now. He thinks I need to spend more time on bed rest and visiting doctors but...honestly, what am I supposed to do? It's a half-marathon, and I've never raced anything that far before. I have three months of rehab and three months of training crammed into five months and...it's a bruise. I'm fine."

"He's so sure that I'm not fine, it's like I'm a child. He's treating me like I'm different, like I suddenly can't handle things, when I'm fine." Her resounding stomp ripples sharp, almost numbing pain through her hip and thigh and her vision goes annoyingly spotty for a millisecond.

"I tried to tell him this-"

"And it was a royal cock up," Astrid points out, eyes sharp and steely. "Thanks for that. All that distrust is really helping me out."

"Sheesh, I can't hear you through the sarcasm," Ruff retorts, apologies malformed and impractical on the back of her tongue.

"No, it's really great, having you pick and prod at my relationship. Awesome. Really," she glares. "Because I absolutely need you and Hiccup to treat me like a kid. That's really great of both of

you."

"Don't lump me with him. I'm trying to help."

"So is he. In his wayâ€¦" She wrinkles her nose and sighs wistfully in those seconds between waves of anger. She was trying to talk to him, and he left. "And you know what the worst part of this is?" Astrid barks out a laugh. "I can't win this fight. I can't go out there throwing low blows. I can't say that he's treating me like an invalid, or like I need his money, because I'm going to spend the rest of my life with that..._asshole_." She stops, chest heaving as the truth of what she just said melts the rest of the way into her consciousness.

"What?" Even Ruff is slightly stunned by that particularly crass revelation, raising her eyebrows briefly before wincing at the stretching bruise and letting her face fall slack. Astrid grins like a psychiatric inpatient, still only halfway through putting on her shoes. "You lost me when you stopped threatening me and went insane."

"I would never-never-throw him under the bus like this. If he'd wanted to rehab his leg faster, I would have helped him. But this is about running and money, and he doesn't get it. And I love him. And if I ever have kids, they're going to be half-Hiccups." She jumbles her thoughts together, grinning and nervous and miserably excited about the prospect of patching up and moving forward. "I'm going to be stuck with this idiot trying to pay for me and take care of me the rest of my life."

"If I hit you, it's a recalibration for your brain," Ruff threatens, wishing she had popcorn.

"Every time I get a cold, that nervous softie is going to be nagging nasty-ass medicine down my throat. I'm never going to kiss anyone else, I'm going to be stuck with Hiccup's stupid ginger stubble until it's white stubble and we _die_." She throws her arms wide and fumbles her watch onto a slightly trembling wrist before shoving her bad foot into her shoe with a grunt that doesn't quite hide her whimper. "And do you want to know what the real kicker is here?"

"That I don't have this on tape to put on the internet?"

"I'm _happy _about it." She stops to breath, entire leg on fire and rejecting the shoe brushing against her ankle. "I'm pissed at you, for trying to help me be tough, because it's hurting Hiccup. I'm-I'm going to call him and _apologize_, Ruff. I'm going to call and say sorry. Not today, because I am right, and I have more dignity than that," she stops to laugh. "But he's way more stubborn than me, and I'm going to have to back off first. I will call and say that I am sorry, even though I'm _not_, because I can't stand it when he looks _disappointed _in me."

"Astrid-

"God, we'll probably get _married_."

"Astrid-

"And live in the suburbs-"

"-strid-"

"With a fucking _horde_ of feral cats that Hiccup can't help but feed-"

"Astrid!" Ruff finally succeeds in cutting her ranting friend off, "I shouldn't have said all of that stuff to Hiccup yesterday."

"That's not an apology."

"Maybe I need my dignity period too," Ruff shrugs and Astrid sighs, looking at her carefully. "Hiccup and you areâ€|"

"Do you want to go to the gym, or what?" Astrid stands, limping towards the door before correcting her stride with a stubborn shift of her hips. Ruff follows in something remarkably akin to a respectful silence.

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It's self-destructive, and Astrid knows it.

She shouldn't be taking the long way back to her dorm, skirting the edge of the track fence and watching people run in circles that look more endless than ever.

It's unhealthy. Anything that makes her heart throb like this can't be healthy. It can't.

She should leave. She should really, absolutely leave.

Andi stands out to her, all long, even steps and determination.

The bench next to the fence suddenly calls to her knee, which has proceeded beyond aching in the last few hours, and she sits down, staring out at the track. It's mostly boys, mostly sprinters, launching themselves forward off of blocks, all zooming shoulders and surging thighs. A few lithe girls are laughing across the field, stretching and jumping and moving with ease she can barely remember.

They lost their last meet.

She nearly had a heart attack reading that in the school newspaper, lurking in the library rather than go back to her room and acknowledge her own desperate boredom. They were a shoe in only a few weeks ago, it was the last meet before nationals, small and supposedly simple, just a few schools with second rate programs.

Practically a scrimmage.

Boys dominated and girls came in second, and Astrid spent an hour staring at the fourth place finishes in the 3k and 5k, staring at those times that would have once seemed so unbearably doable that are now practically impossible. She can't do that right now, and because of her, the team lost, tarnishing an amazing record for the season.

No one even qualified for the 3k at nationals, it's going to be a race bereft of any of her teammates, hollow and probably slow. She was going to win that race. She was world champion.

World.

She used to be the one to beat, and now she's just the reason that her team is getting beaten. She used to be a weapon, a tool, and now she's a non-entity barely worth mentioning in a disappointed side note.

Seeing that statistic, all of the probable routes towards her team's untimely demise played through her mind on repeat. They were out partying too late, with no one to drag them home before three. They didn't have anyone pushing them, anyone in the middle who'd work out with the shorter and longer distances, keeping everyone on point. These last four years, that team became like a family, and this year, as the winningest senior, she found herself in a motherly position, nursing everyone along.

She hadn't minded, not really, it was just repaying all those kind older girls, now graduated and retired, who had helped her step up her game at first. The one's who'd gotten her out of her own head, appreciating two third places for the sake of the team rather than a single first place that looked good on her stats page.

It's not that she doesn't trust the seniors that she left behind, because she does, really. She knows that it's a good team, one of the best outside of the ivies.

But they didn't win a tiny meet, and she can't help but think it might be her fault.

Maybe no one was really trying, saving up for nationals and spending an undue amount of effort avoiding catastrophic injuries like hers. But what they don't understand, the little tidbit that she's never going to be able to relay, is that injuries like this aren't predictable at all. They don't happen during workouts, or even during meets.

Those are different, those are badges of pride, consequences of the sport.

This is something worse, something futile. A wrench thrown at the back of her head while she was busy anticipating blows from the front.

This is the kind of injury that drags down an entire team with the jitters left behind. It takes the stability out of everything, roads, feet, shoes. Teammates. Relationships.

Her and Hiccup.

She hopes they get their shit together and perform at Nationals. She bets they will. She trusts them.

She wonders if the commentators even remember her name, if they'll mention her again, and if they'll say anything definitive.

She checks her watch and stands with a rickety sigh, glancing towards the track one last time before heading back to her room. She still has to get to the gym today, anyway.

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By Saturday, Astrid's bruise has extended a fuzzy, bluish inch down her shin, and stiffness has a painful new meaning. She and Ruff are seated in the dining hall, and Astrid is nibbling on an apple, enviously watching the other girl motor through a second fluffy Belgian waffle.

"Stop staring at me," Ruff gripes, "you look like one of those starving African kids in those commercials."

"I'm hungry."

"Then go get more food," she gestures to the buffet with a syrupy fork.

"I'm still at 109," Astrid shrugs, looking back at her apple and taking a slightly more enthusiastic bite. At least the fruit is juicy today, so much better than yesterday's gritty red delicious.

"Yeah, and I don't think your boobs are going anywhere," Ruff mumbles through a mouthful of half-masticated waffle.

"You think?" Astrid looks down, considering the statement. She guesses she should be happy about those being permanent, but it's just contributing to this overwhelming feeling of overall wrongness.

Her knee is tighter, more itchy and stubbornly painful everyday. Her clothes don't fit right, clinging and touching her skin in foreign, disruptive patterns.

Hiccup is...Hiccup hasn't called.

Her phone feels like a lead brick against her thigh, firm and nagging her to nut up and step down. She'd rather deal with this contention, agree to disagree, than steep in the bitter silence blame the two of them for inborn tenacity. Not much about Hiccup is stereotypically manly, but the yearn to be right remains the stubborn exception.

Well, along with the fact that he likes to pick her up more than would ever be necessary.

She'd probably let him now, after these two long days of silence. She probably wouldn't even put up too much of a fuss, she'd direct her glare away from him and focus on the arms digging in behind her knees and shoulders while his persistent lower ribs nag at her hip.

Of course when he put her down, she'd still squirm away and cross her arms, insisently walking the narrow line between scowling and pouting, clinging to that persistent dignity. That dignity that has lately been way more trouble than it could ever really be worth.

She'll call him after breakfast.

It's time.

"Daydreaming?" Ruff asks with a smirk, standing with envious ease and grabbing her plate to bus the table. Astrid follows, eyes averted towards the table top, hopping on her good foot and wincing as she plants her reluctant right toes. Even through her pants, she can see the bruise's swollen halo, and she wonders if she should have taken the time to put on her brace that morning.

Probably, but it's too late now.

"I'm going to call Hiccup," she nods, ignoring Ruff's cocked eyebrow. After a moment, the taller girl's arch expression melts and she takes Astrid's plate in a quiet gesture of apology.

"Tell him I'm sorry too," she grins, setting her dishes into the bin near the trashcan and gesturing to the green and blue bruise under her eye with flippant fingers. "And nice punch."

"I'll let you say the nice punch part...I shouldn't condone him beating you...no matter how tempting it is." She dodges Ruff's friendly punch with a stumble and a grin, shaking her head when Ruff practically lopes away towards the door, long legs eating up the ground. "Wait-ugh."

She hates feeling slow, of all unbelievable things. She's never had to ask anyone to wait for her in her life and it's a frankly miserable sensation. Walking faster is impossible, with the way that her knee is aching and protesting, tugging at the seams of her pants with an almost audible squeak.

It feels natural, wonderfully natural, to put extra power into that exercise deprived left foot and gain a little speed. Her right foot takes the landing alright, arch flattening and absorbing the extra force almost gleefully, like a dusty bike whirring out of the garage on the first day of spring. But the rightness fades as soon as her knee takes the weight, crumpling and popping menacingly as it gives out entirely, dumping her forward. Her hand shoot out and catch her before her face hits the floor, going clammy almost immediately as the pain hits her out of the blue.

It's as bad as the original injury, and invisible knife plunged solidly into the back of the joint, twisting and turning and tearing.

"-trid?" Ruff asks, voice thin and far off through that crimson tinted glaze of pain and some strange part of Astrid's mind takes the time to recognize her friend's scuffed up sneakers out of the corner of her eye.

"Fuuuuuuck," she grumbles, forehead touching against the cool tile as her fist pounds autonomously at the ground, brain reeling to decipher the pain. "Son of a-goddamn-ow. Fuck. Owowowow."

"Are you ok?" Ruff's genuine worry is the worst part, bringing urgent authenticity to her anxious, speeding pulse.

"Nope," she grits her teeth and tries to sit, tries to roll to the side, but another surge of blinding pain sends her vision momentarily

black and she blinks frantically until the tile grout resurges from the darkness. "Knee."

She barks out a laugh at her own obvious reply, hearing Hiccup's voice droll and furious in the back of her head. _Yeah, I could have guessed that much_.

"Can you sit?" Ruff asks, and Astrid is unbelievably grateful when she scares off a group of stereotypically sympathetic male voices with a slew of curses.

"Letting it pass," Astrid grunts, trying to focus on the pain's magnitude instead of the way that every throb makes her want to pass out. "Not passing."

She doesn't have time to resent Ruff's hands under her armpits, hauling her up as the downward rushing blood highlights something decidedly wrong in the pit of her knee. Ruff's arm slides around her upper back, supporting most of her weight and dragging her forward with a last minute hop on Astrid's part.

"At least you're scrawny," Ruff attempts to tease, face shocked and bloodless, and Astrid grits her teeth.

"Hospital."

"Yep."

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Astrid reclines back in the hospital bed, breathing pinched and hurried as she tries to calm the frantic pulse in her knee. The joint is impossibly purple, mid-thigh tinged with upwardly fading green beneath another hospital gown.

They'd had to cut her pants off, the swelling was so bad by the time that she got to the hospital.

Ruff looks honestly shell-shocked, hunched in a chair in the corner, endlessly less comforting than Hiccup's father's earnest steadiness. She remembers feeling parented, and struggling to truly mind, and wants to call him and take back every ungrateful thing that she said.

"Can you stop staring at me like I'm going to explode?" Astrid barks, uncharacteristically whiny tinge sneaking into her voice.

"Your knee looks like it might explode," Ruff cringes, gripping her chair's armrests with white knuckles.

"Oh, and you don't think that's cool?" The injured girl snarks. "Because exploding knees seem like they'd be right up your alley. Downright entertaining." She lashes out, because anything is better than releasing the pained tears that are pooling behind her eyes. She wishes that a doctor would come by carrying some of those painkillers that she'd normally refuse. "Looking pretty _squeamish_ over there, Ruff."

"I'm not-Jesus, it's still swelling up, isn't it? That thing has a

fucking pulse."

"I actually knew that, believe it or not," Astrid snaps, hand clutching at tangled bangs as her teeth grit together, sparks of indignant pain shooting up through her stressed jaw. "It feels _wonderful_."

"This really seems like a time for sarcasm," Ruff gags, hand at her throat, and looks at the floor, "to you?"

"Are you seriously gagging over there?" A laugh seeps unwelcome into the room and Astrid tries unsuccessfully to relax. "I'm the injured one."

"God, what if it's all mangled in there?" Ruff cradles her head in her hands and stares the floor for an answer. "And they cut it and a bunch of...chunky tomato soup comes pouring out-"

"You have been watching too many horror movies," Astrid gripes. "And this is half your fault anyway."

"Sorry I forgot to walk cripple speed-"

To her credit, Ruff does actually sound quite sorry.

"Hiccup was right, I pushed it too hard," Astrid shakes her head, not exactly sure where to direct her exasperation. "And you-I would have felt like a wimp to slow down while you were so sure of me...I was so sure of me!" she scoffs. "Then again, I'm the bitch who listened to you instead of-fuck, ouch," she pauses to swear as the knee gives a particularly vicious throb, "him."

"I thought you _were_ fine-"

"Yeah, I got that."

"Why didn't you tell me that you weren't fine?" Ruff sounds meaner, more normal, when she's not looking directly at the knee and her sharp voice is oddly comforting.

"Because you would have told me to woman up."

"True!" Ruff pauses, exhaling hard as she catches sight of Astrid's leg out of the corner of her eye. "I'll go outside and call Hiccup, alright?"

"You're just grossed out," Astrid manages a grin, taking too much satisfaction from the fact that Ruff does look a bit green.

"I'll be back," she shakes her head, trying to clear the nausea and turning towards the doorway. Before she actually starts walking, it opens and a doctor enters, looking at Astrid with that critically medical gaze.

"Good morning, Astrid," he greets, offering a hand to shake and leaving latex smelling medical glove residue on Astrid's fingers. "How long ago was the surgery?" He asks, probing her shiny new scar with fingers that might as well be red hot iron.

"About four weeks," Ruff answers and Astrid is for once glad to have

someone speaking for her, as she's utterly unable to convince her jaw to unlock.

"This is...I want to get an MRI, but there's too much fluid in the joint to get a clear image. I'm going to need to drain itâ€¦" he feels around to the back of her knee where that invisible knife is still dug in and twisting. Astrid flinches back with an embarrassing groan, pricks of light assaulting the inside of her eyelids. "Ah...ok, I won't be able to administer a local anesthetic in the area right now, I believe that the swelling has displaced your popliteal nerve cluster, and I don't want to risk hitting it."

"I'll be fine," Astrid manages through a scowl, relieved to have those fingers away from her skin. "It'll feel better once it's drained, just get it over with."

"Alright then," the doctor steps back and Astrid breathes a subconscious sigh of relief. "I'll be back shortly."

When the man leaves, Ruff turns to follow him, hands shaking like fall leaves at the ends of her arms.

"Where you do think you're going?" Astrid asks, voice nipping into the realm of hysterics. "You're staying here."

"I was going to go call Hiccup," Ruff reminds her friend, more kind than insulting as she points towards the door. She wants to escape the room, that throbbing knee is mocking her, blaming her for everything and she can't escape the guilt pooling like bile in her stomach.

"No, you're staying here." The repetition is hell on Astrid's ability to hold together, and she hates how weak she sounds. "They're about to-they can't even numb it first."

"Wouldn't you rather have Hiccup here?" Ruff asks, and her nervous voice is worse than anything that might be about to happen.

"Of course," Astrid snips, wringing clammy hands together. "You can call him while I'm getting the MRI, alright?"

"I'm sure he'll hurry-"

"That's not-sit down," Astrid orders, and it must be more convincing than she feels because Ruff listens, plopping into the hospital chair with a meek squeak of her rubber soles on the tile. "And buck up, I'm the one who gets to freak out here, alright?"

"I've never-One time when we were seven, I pushed Tuff off of the trampoline and he broke his arm. I puked on the nurse," Ruff admits in a hurried whisper and Astrid raises her eyebrows.

"You only broke Tuff's arm once?"

"I don't like hurting people who don't deserve it, alright? And don't laugh-"

"I think that's the most normal thing you've ever said, I'm not laughing at all."

"You're my best friend, and I didn't notice that you were hurt. And I made it worse," she admits, and Astrid recognizes something in her sullenly challenging tone.

"I should have told you to fuck off. I should have listened to Hiccup-"

"I might as well have just clubbed you in the knee," Ruff continues, "at least that would have been fun for like a second ."

"A whole second?" Astrid laughs, because it's easier than crying.

"Half a second."

"Let me break your fingers, and we're alright," Astrid holds out her hand towards Ruff, knowing that she won't have the confidence to grab on with the doctor in the room. It's almost possible to pretend Ruff's bigger hand is male and freckled and full of indefinable comfort. "This could be really bad."

"The draining?" Ruff checks, focusing on the unhealthy flush of Astrid's cheek rather than look down at that swollen, trembling knee.

"What if it's my ACL again?"

The question hangs in the air like one of those movie moments when the soundtrack stops, leaving characters lingering in tense silence.

"It's not."

"It wasn't...it wasn'tâ€|I didn't let it heal. I bet the stitches ripped out. I bet that's what happened," Astrid pushes her free hand back through her messy hair, clenching her jaw and blinking back tears. "I bet they're going to have to open it back up and...and...Double tears never heal right. I knew that, why did Iâ€|?"

"Come on, those stitches made that thing stronger than before," Ruff comforts, and Astrid wishes she were Hiccup. She wishes that he weren't mad at her, that he were sitting right here beside her and telling her the truth rather than some sugarcoated version that'll make her feel better now only to devastate her later. He knows that she needs the truth. He knows.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying," Ruff pauses. "You know how when you put a patch on something, the patch never rips? The entire damn tendon is a patch, Astrid. I bet you just sprained it or something."

"So I actually am in the hospital for a sprain this time?" Astrid laughs, ignoring a single tear that seeps out of the outside corner of her eye and runs down her temple. "I am a wuss. You did let me go soft."

"Sorry about that," Ruff laughs, a bit watery herself. "Squishy looks good on you...fatty."

"Shut up," Astrid manages a quiet smile, exhaling as soothingly as she can before relaxing against the bed. "That asshole doctor sure is taking his sweet time, isn't he?"

"I bet it's like Grey's Anatomy out there," Ruff smirks, scooting her chair a little closer to Astrid's bed. "He's probably banging an intern in a closet somewhere."

"Good, that means he's not one of those weirdoes who fall in love with patients," Astrid laughs. "I do not have time for a love triangle right now."

"Who are you kidding, Hofferson?" Ruff squeezes her fingers. "We're two college girls holding hands, if this were a soap opera, you'd be in a love square."

"Right. I forgot how all college girls are free agents."

"You're going to be fine, Astrid...As long as you listen to your boyfriend and lay down. Ignore my big mouth, alright?"

"Oh, I was planning on it," she grins with a wet laugh. "Get ready for my selective deafness. You're going to need a megaphone."

" Good ."

They don't have to wait long for the doctor to return with an ominous looking syringe, mounted with a needle half as big as a drinking straw. Astrid gulps.

"Ok, I'm going to inject this into the space under your kneecap, and see exactly what we're looking at here, alright?"

"Ok," Astrid shrugs, and Ruff has to be at least a little impressed by how quickly she put her face together into a mask of mild disinterest. Astrid's fingers clamp down on Ruff's , her ring finger folding nearly painfully across her middle and index digits. "Go for it, doc."

He steps forward and holds Astrid's ankle to the bed with a carefully firm clinical hand and she does her best not to stiffen, focusing on Ruff's hand and letting her mind replace it with one incomprehensibly more comforting. The needle feels impossibly scalding against her skin and she lets her free hand fist in the sheets, fingernails digging into her palm as Ruff's fingers conform to the inside of her tight fist.

"And going in," the doctor warns with that low voice that they must teach in third year medical school. The needle breaks her skin with a sparkle of pain, pushing inwards and fighting the resistance of her skin before breaking free with a disturbingly smooth slide and entering the zone of liquid. "Are you ok?"

"I'm...it doesn't feel good," Astrid falls back on the sarcasm, frowning and sighing with odd relief as the doctor pulls back on the syringe's plunger and removes a long draw of crimson tinted liquid. Not quite blood, too orange to signify a full on bleed, closer to tainted lymph than anything. The pain dies down when all that liquid pressure on her displaced nerve dissipates and she loosens her death

grip on Ruff's fingers, trying to focus on anything but the oddly panicky sensation of the needle inside of her joint. "That's...less pressure. It feels a bit better," she clues the doctor in and he nods patiently, filling the syringe almost entirely and pulling out of the vastly shrunken knee with a smooth motion. More of the orange liquid oozes out of the hole and Ruff swallows a gag, trying to wiggle her recently released fingers within Astrid's now loose grip and biting her lip against a sudden stab of pain.

The doctor tapes a pad of gauze to the wound and taps the syringe, watching the blood start to settle towards the bottom, slowly unclouding the thin lymph. Astrid drops Ruff's hand entirely, folding her arms across her stomach and staring at the ceiling as the adrenaline kicks in with a rush of dizzying nausea that makes her wish for a security bucket.

"I'll take this to the lab for testing and get an MRI expedited, I need to see if we need to go in there and close up this bleeding...but it doesn't look like it," he looks again at the syringe and spares Astrid a smile that looks genuinely relieved. "I'll be back."

"Uh...doc?" Ruff cuts in, holding a hand carefully towards the man. Her ring finger is swollen and bluish at the base, canted awkwardly towards her middle finger. "Can you spare a splint? The she-beast's grip is a little tight."

Astrid can't help but grin at that particular nickname.

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**So, a whole lot happened here. Astrid realizing that she's going to be with Hiccup forever, watching her team practice self-destructivelyâ€|and the knee. That damned knee. **

**Keep the reviews coming guys, I'm getting so much morbid joy out of knowing what happens next. **

18. Chapter 18

And this is late again, I'm sorry. The life, it gets in the way.

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Fishlegs is standing in his apartment complex's entry way, looking every bit his two hundred fifty pounds, sternly crossed arms in front of him when Hiccup slumps inside, pushing the door open with his non-dominant hand. The boys make eye contact and Fish's eyes flick from the still swollen and blue bruise on Hiccup's jaw to his clumsily taped knuckles and a smile breaks out across his broad face.

"She said you got the worst of it, and I didn't believe her," he shakes his head as his arms fall back to his sides and he deflates into comparative harmlessness.

"You're telling me that you'd bet on me in a fight with Ruff?" Hiccup manages a laugh at that assumption, aching jaw reminding him just how

stupid that particular move was.

Especially since it appears that Ruff was right about the whole thing.

Which makes him feel really smart. Completely.

It's always great fighting for things that just aren't going to happen, he's a massive fan of futile efforts.

Even Toothless is sick of the sarcasm at this point.

"Obviously the statistics pointed to Ruff's victory," Fishlegs frowns. "But I sort of had an issue blindly believing them in this case."

"Right, because worrying about your girlfriend isn't a criminal offense," Hiccup shakes his head and shrugs, gesturing towards the stairs to head up to his friend's apartment. "Thanks for looking at this by the way, I don't know why it's not working out."

"Probably a fresh pair of eyes is all it needs," Fishlegs comforts Hiccup, familiar with the stress in finishing a massive final project...and familiar with what a Ruff punch to the jaw feels like.

"I just don't get it. All the statics calculations work and all the signs are right, and the first three probe points in the CAD match up, but then I'm off by an order of magnitude," Hiccup steps aside so that Fishlegs can open his apartment door and the two boys sit down across from each other at the small but tidy kitchen table. Hiccup pulls a thick report out of his backpack and plucks off the clip, peeling a few handwritten pages out of the stack and sliding them across the table. "Starting in step 4 here, something goes bad, and Thuggory and I can't figure it out for the life of us."

"Ok...so are these measurements pulled off of the CAD model or the part?" Fishlegs asks slowly, pointing towards the table of numbers at the top of the page.

"The CAD model was pulled from the part, so it doesn't matter...just a second, phone is ringing," he pulls his phone out of his pocket and frowns at Ruff's name on the caller ID. He quickly shoves the phone back into his pants, glowering at the table between them.

"Who was it?" Fishlegs asks cautiously. "Judging by your expression, I won't believe 'telemarketer'."

"It was your girlfriend."

"Maybe she was calling to apologize?" The larger boy shrugs, unable to calculate the miniscule probability of that possibility without his z-table.

"And maybe she learned to fly and just wanted to brag."

"Ruff isn't interested in aviation-oh, right. Maybe she was calling you for Astrid," Fishlegs suggests and Hiccup's frown deepens.

"I'm sure Astrid is perfectly capable of calling me herself," he

holds onto that indignance, despite the fingertips that suddenly itch to reach for the phone. He could call and apologize. He needs to apologize for leaving, that wasn't right but-well, he couldn't take that look on her face anymore. Like she was doing him some sort of favor with her silence, like whatever was swirling in her mind was so mean, so beyond and above him that he couldn't take it.

How bad could it be? How bad is it really if he is holding her back?

That particular thought settles in his chest, untrue and downright painful. He's...he supports her. He has always supported her. If she doesn't know that, they're looking at some unseen but fundamental problem.

"I'm gleaning that you'd rather me focus on the math," Fishlegs nods assuredly and looks back at the paper, tracing a finger through the steps of the stress calculation and pausing in the third line. "This c, are you sure it's fifteen millimeters?"

"Absolutely," Hiccup looks over at the paper, pointing to the diagram...the diagram with a three millimeter diameter. "Oh. Yeah, that'd be 1.5 millimeters," he pushes a cool palm against his forehead and frowns. "That's my order of magnitude, right there. And you found it in five minutes," he sighs and pushes his chair away from the table as the space is suddenly too small and close. "I've been off of my game lately."

"Fighting with Astrid does that to you."

"I know this," Hiccup frowns at the straight assessment, no matter how much he really does appreciate the simplicity.

"You look like you need a beer," Fishlegs assesses, walking to the fridge with a little difficulty in the too small kitchen, narrowly avoiding bashing his hip on the counter. He plants a cold can in front of Hiccup a moment later and the brunette opens it gratefully and takes a swig.

"You're right on that one," he laughs a bit miserably, yanking the report back towards himself and crossing out the incorrect value with an angry red line before writing the correct number back in. "Do you mind checking the algebra on the rest of this, while I'm here?"

"Of course," and Fishlegs looks legitimately excited as he pulls the paper back towards himself, careful eyes skimming the numbers for errors. He frowns and pulls his phone out of his own pocket and checks what appears to be a text, typing something quickly before setting it on the table.

"Who was it?"

"Ruff," he mumbles through numerical concentration.

"What did she say?" Hiccup asks, hand suddenly nervous and clammy around his beer can.

"She asked me to call you."

"What did you say?"

"That you were at my apartment, so I didn't need to call you," Fishlegs shrugs, a little peeved being interrupted from his proofreading. Hiccup shoots him an exasperated look. "What? You are at my apartment."

"You told Ruff where I am?" Hiccup asks again and Fishlegs eyes light up with realization.

"I'd estimate you have about five...no four minutes before she comes bursting in here."

"She has a key?"

"Yeah, for almost a year now," Fishlegs says proudly and Hiccup can't bring himself to be happy for his friend in the moment. "Right, umm-"

"Honey, I'm home," Ruff's voice echoes through the apartment as she shuts the door behind herself. "You!" She points to Hiccup and walks over with remarkable urgency, hands landing casually on Fishlegs' shoulders. "Nice face."

"Ruff, you're four minutes early, apparently," Hiccup glares at Fishlegs, who shrugs sheepishly.

"Oh, I texted you from the parking lot," Ruff corrects, patting his broad shoulder.

"Thirty seconds would make more sense then," and Fishlegs looks momentarily relieved that the numbers of his life still make sense before his expression returns to apologetic.

"You," Ruff points dramatically at Hiccup again, ring finger encased in a splint and jutting his direction along with her obviously intentional index finger.

"What happened to your finger?" Hiccup asks, bitingly curious.

"Astrid broke it, she's in the hospital, you have to go," Ruff urges, "I'm sure you know this, but she has a grip like the hulk." She looks almost embarrassed as she tucks the injury behind Fishlegs' back, expression earnest and urgent. "She's having an MRI, you need to go."

"What happened?" He glares at Ruff, feeling a little too proud of her black eye and hating himself for it, standing and collecting his report back into his backpack. He slings the bag over his shoulder and waits for an answer, nervous nausea settling into the pit of his stomach.

"She was just walking," Ruff swallows hard, looking greener than Hiccup has ever seen her. "And itâ€|her knee gave out and started swelling like crazy and she had to go get it drained," she gestures to her braced finger. "Just go, dude, I promised I'd get you."

"Alâ€"Alright," Hiccup holds back all of those practically canned retorts that he wants to spew at Ruff's face. "The hospital by

campus?" He double checks and Ruff nods.

"And I'm also sorry," she throws the comment out there nonchalantly, almost innocently.

"Sorry?"

"You're like probably the second most supportive boyfriend in the world," a fond pat on Fish's shoulder with her good hand. "And I was being a bitch because I thought that Astrid couldn't do it herself. But she didn't want to be a bitch at all and I'm an idiot." Ruff pauses with a wolfish grin that looks oddly appropriate beneath her bruised eye. "Oh and nice punch."

Hiccup stares at Fishlegs as if to confirm that Ruff is, in fact, speaking English.

"That's one of the top five longest apologies I've heard from her," the blonde boy nods to Hiccup encouragingly and he steps backwards from the table with a faltering click.

"Thanks Ruff." He leaves with a sheepish wave, heart pounding in his chest. He shouldn't have left. He should have stayed and dragged her, kicking and screaming, to the doctor.

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Astrid frowns at the sterile bandage on her thankfully shrunken and elevated knee, an icepack tucked almost lovingly embracing her leg with a firmly wrapped ace bandage. The joint throbs with every inhale, aching and twanging in tune with the heartbeat that she hasn't quite managed to slow since receiving the news.

Her ACL is fine, a little stressed, maybe, a little inflamed around still dissolving stitches. But the Grade 1 sprain of her PCL has progressed to Grade 2, and it's now classified as mild tearing.

The doctor had been palpably relieved, patting her shoulder in a near fatherly way that made her feel like absolute crap. If it weren't for the bolded 'NO CELLPHONES' sign on the wall, she would have already called Gerard right then and there, probably blubbing some painfully awkward apology.

Hiccup isn't here yet, and Ruff isn't back and Astrid is starting to wonder if he's being difficult to convince.

Is something really so wrong that her being hospitalized isn't enough to drag Hiccup back? Sure, she expects silence, and eventually some gloating, maybe even some reasonably friendly teasing about her being wrong. She's not really expecting any sort of talk or attention beyond the necessary anyway. He's angry enough that she's prepared to deal with a cold shoulder until at least tomorrow.

Night.

But she can't think of anything so horrible between them that he'd literally avoid her hospital bed. Even during their worst fight ever, she'd rushed an inhaler across town and attempted to be pleasant to him. This absence is unprecedented and feels cruel. She's ashamed to admit even to herself that she can't deal with fixing

something so broken right now, while the rest of her life is trying to drift away.

She's on bed rest, strict bed rest, for four days, and she's definitely not dumb enough to violate doctor's orders this time. Is she going to spend those four days in her dorm, eating crappy school food delivered in a Styrofoam container by a teasing and apologetic Ruff?

While it's not necessarily a bad way to recover, she wants her dog and her bed, and a chance to apologize even if it means yelling everything she did wrong through Hiccup's door until he listens to her.

She takes her phone out of her pocket, frowning at the dismally blank screen and contemplating violating the sign.

Maybe just to call Ruff, see if her line is busy.

If Hiccup is taking this long to convince.

She'll give it five minutes then call Ruff. At least she has a solid plan.

Three and a half minutes later, she hears a commotion in the hallway, someone bumping into the wall without that distinctive screech of gurney wheels. She pauses, ears cuing on something asymmetrical and oddly comforting to the sound. The door opens a few seconds later and Hiccup walks in, backpack over one shoulder, dark circles under his eyes oddly matching the fully bloomed bruise along his jaw.

"Oh, hey," Astrid greets, sounding transparently desperate.

"Sorry it took me so long," he walks over to her, laying a gentle, no nonsense hand over her forehead as if to check for fever, fingers authoritative and comforting against her eyebrows. "Nice pants," he spares a smirk at the scrubs, rucked up over her bandaged and injured knee.

"They had to cut mine off."

"It was that swollen?"

"I'm sorry," she mutters under her breath, glancing up at him through her eyelashes and wishing that she'd had the chance to do this on the phone first, without his brilliant eyes boring disappointed into her forehead.

"So what's wrong? How bad is it?" Tender, almost clinical hands sliding down her shoulder and holding, calming her pulse without trying.

"My ACL is fineâ€¦it's stressed but ummâ€¦" she pauses and stares at his fingers against her arm. "If you're still mad, could you not do that?" She wants it to stay, if it stays her apology is accepted and everything is more than a few steps closer to being ok again. His hand slips away from her skin, albeit reluctantly, falling slack back at his side. "It's my PCL," she clears her throat, staring at her knee to avoid looking at him, "It's sprained, mildly torn. No surgery or anything, but I'm on four days of bed restâ€¦then I've got a

doctor appointment back home" she bites her lip. "Unless you want me to stay up here."

"I don't," he amends, awkwardly crossing his arms before the situation feels strange and he slouches back forward, fingers brushing at the outer seams of his pants. "Are you going to listen this time?" He asks, not quite patronizing enough to warrant the animosity that bubbles in her throat.

He's treating her like a child because she acted like one. It's that easy, and all the more cutting for its simplicity.

"Yes."

"Do you actually mean that? Or are you going to go all macho on us as soon as you feel better?"

"Us?" She asks quietly, out of comebacks and more importantly, reasons to make them.

"My dad," he starts, and it's everything gravely serious he's always been under that goofy skin. He's the guy she followed into an animal shelter, never once looking over her shoulder or scheming a backup plan. She reluctantly falls into line, smoothed fully into place by the heavy dutiful throbbing nagging at her leg. She wants his hand on her shoulder again, comforting and sincere, whether he's mad at her or not.

"I shouldn't have said that" any of that, alright?"

"Spike is upset too. I meant to tell you the other night but but I wanted to keep things civil."

"Tell me now," Astrid snaps, pushing up on her elbows and swinging her good foot over the side of the bed.

"She's been sort of a mess, I had to hand feed her dinner last night. She hasn't been interested in eating."

That hits home like nothing else and her lips flap wordlessly, throbbing echoing in her ears like coins rattling in a tin can.

"Is she?...can I'm"

"She's fine, she ousted Toothless off of my bed last night and got some sleep on your pillow." Astrid swallows hard. "You left yelling and hurt," and the truth is worse than any accusation could be. "She's upset. My dad is upset. I'm upset."

"You left too."

"Are you coming home?" He asks, looking at the top of her head, more than a little inappropriately fascinated with the streaks of sunny blonde.

"Yeah, I've got a lot of apologies to make," she looks him in the eye, recovering her bluntness with a surge of comfortable confidence. "I said sorry."

"I heard you," he frowns, "but I'm going to need to actually see this

bed rest concept."

"I'm on bed rest. I'll be on bed rest," she glares at her knee, wishing it were the problem here. An ambiguously third party problem that she could blame and hate and destroy. "For four days. I promise."

"Does it hurt?" he asks, hand floating out and almost touching against her arm, entirely of its own stubborn accord.

"It doesn't feel great," she laughs low in her throat, sliding her bad leg off of the bed with a whimper that she swallows, biting the side of her cheek. Her toes cringe at the cold floor and she fumbles for her shoes. Hiccup watches for a few seconds before sighing and bending over, sliding her sneaker onto her good foot too gently, tying the laces with obnoxiously steady fingers. He stands halfway, peering around the room before standing up the rest of the way, still holding her right shoe.

"Where are your crutches?"

"Your house," Astrid shrugs, slipping off of the side of the bed onto her good foot, wincing at the rush of blood through her further mangled knee.

"Seriously?" He asks, stepping forward with an obviously peeved hand landing against her lower back. "You're supposed to be on bed rest, Astrid."

"No one said anything about walking," Astrid snaps, twitching away from the palm against her back. "Can you not?"

"Bed rest means no walking, last time I checked," Hiccup sighs, hand stubbornly curling around her waist. She pulls away, yanking a little too hard and stumbling off cant. He catches her with a sternly looped arm around her, swinging her up too easily and holding a careful arm behind her thighs, avoiding that thickly padded knee bandage. "Come on."

"Put me down, I'll find a wheelchair. I'm probably supposed to leave in a wheelchair anyway." It's too intimate, being this close to him while he's still mad and cranky and distant beyond the deceptive heat sinking through her side.

"You'd rather have me wheel you out?" He asks, quirking an eyebrow and kicking the door open with his foot and stepping into the hallway, quickly repositioning his hands under her before heading forward.

"I'd wheel myself out," Astrid crosses her arms.

"Of course you would," he rolls his eyes, grunting slightly and curling her a little closer. "Mind putting an arm around my neck, you're slipping."

"I don't care," she judges the distance to the floor and wonders if she can keep from screaming after she falls.

"Astrid," he sighs her name, exasperated and gently chastising. It's like she's in third grade, bright but again in trouble for punching

someone without suitable reason. Her arm unfurls and wraps around the back of his neck, hauling some of her weight from his arms to his shoulders and he inhales, relieved. She risks a glance at his face and he's frowning, betraying nothing about those gentle fingers curled around her.

He catches her gaze and his grimace deepens before he stares straight at the door ahead of them, heart beat mellow against her side.

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Spike rushes them as soon as they step inside, followed quickly by Toothless. The pit whimpers loudly, tail wagging so hard she squirms in a frantic circle around Hiccup's feet, warbling low in her throat. Astrid lets her hand slip from around Hiccup's shoulders, dropping to her good foot and sitting down on the welcome mat, wrapping arms around the dog's neck and letting her lick her neck and chin with an eager, tepid tongue.

"Hey, hey, hey," she mutters, tucking her forehead close to the soft, grey fur of Spike's neck, kissing her collar and pulling the dog halfway onto her lap. Toothless sits on Hiccup's foot and looks up at him, nose resting against his hip, pink tongue peeking out of his mouth. Hiccup scratches his chin and watches Astrid a little too intently.

She looks so—her, curled up on the floor around Spike, muttering apologies into the dog's gray fur, arms wrapped tightly around her muscular ribcage. He wants to sit down with her, one arm around her waist while Toothless joins in the fun from the other side, probably knocking both of them over and tromping on their heads until they surrender to full faced kisses.

Her apology hangs heavy over his head, equally relieving and ambiguous. Does she mean it, or is she sorry that they fought? She gets like that sometimes, falls off of his wavelength and apologizes for absolutely the wrong thing, determined that he's mad she broke a bowl rather than being furious about her cleaning it up with bare fingers and getting cut.

Does she think Ruff was right?

He stares at her, eyes closed and sweetly tucked against Spike's shoulder. She doesn't resent him, doesn't she? Maybe not in a loud way, or an intentionally cruel way, but she hates this. She hates what he's doing, and why he's doing it. She hates having someone concerned for her safety above the rest of her.

She—she—she—

It's probably been over a decade since someone nagged her about this. She never had anyone telling her to stay away from the top of the stairs, no matter how terse. No one ever bought her icy-hot for growing pains and left the shiny new tube on her bathroom counter to avoid an awkward conversation. She never went outside to an already shoveled car on snowy mornings.

But—

That doesn't really make it right, does it?

It was months that he sat there, letting her take care of him when he couldn't even look at her without feeling light and fuzzy. Back when her seeing him in his boxers was mortifying, she knelt proud and beautiful beside his bed, checking bandages and scars with a smile. He'd hated that. He hated every awkward second that made him feel like less of a man, like less of a partner and more of a _project_.

But he understood the necessity, he never resented her, only the situation. But she seems to be deeper in than that, further from a general displeasure and zeroing in on him. There are only so many times that she can give him those frozen blue eyes and apologize, daring him to dig deeper and press her into telling him something.

He'sâ€|he can't do this tonight. He doesn't even know if he can do it tomorrow, not while looking at her feels like this.

Because standing here, under all of his frustration is that constant pool of love, and he's starting to worry that her love is sinking into the turmoil, blending indistinct until it'll be unsalvageable. Is her new constant misery implicit? Is this some side effect of the end of her athletic era?

He wants to pick her back up and carry her to his bed, tuck her in on her normal side, and curl up around her for some decent sleep. His fingers linger too long around Toothless's chin and the wolf licks them, bringing him back to himself as he shakes off the temptation.

Some things just aren't smart.

Pushing things under Astrid's rug is one of them.

He turns, doing his best to ignore Astrid curled on the floor, utterly uncomfortable and sprawled on the welcome mat with her forehead pressed against Spike's as the dog's tail thumps uneven and excited on the floor. Her crutches are slightly dusty, leaning against her bedroom door and he grabs them, cool in his hand and oddly foreign, the means of her separation new and shiny and hard. She's sitting by the time he walks back into the entryway, Toothless attentive and slowly wagging at his heels and he offers her the crutches with one hand and an open palm up help her up.

"Oh, thanks," she accepts the hand grudgingly, avoiding eye contact as he hauls her to her good foot and neatly hands her a crutch that she tucks into her armpit. "Ummâ€|"

"I'm headed to bed," he cuts her off, staring blankly around the room before faking a dramatic yawn, arms stretching to either side and tugging his shirt up just far enough to reveal a strip of green boxers above his pants.

"Just likeâ€|alright," she sighs. "It's five o'clock."

"I have homework."

"It's a Saturday night." Her hop towards him is almost endearing enough and he wobbles, glancing at the sun still streaming in through the window. "Evening."

"I'mâ€|You sided with Ruff, Astrid," Hiccup mutters, and Astrid wishes she hadn't pressed. "And she said that I was holding you back."

"I'm sorry," Astrid repeats, hopping on her good foot and getting stable on the crutches with a wince.

"I know you are, I justâ€|"

"I'll see you tomorrow, alright?" Astrid spares him the pain of explaining, nodding curtly and trying to hide her frown in a downright pleasant smile and he backs up towards the hallway, Toothless on his heels like a loyal shadow.

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"Heyâ€|" Astrid greets, understandably apprehensive as she knocks on the open doorframe of Gerard's office. "Doâ€"urgh," she curses the tongue that feels like floppy rubber in her mouth and takes a deep breath, bright red as she starts over. "Do you have a minute?"

"Of course, Astrid." The fact that he's smiling at her is making this all worse. It's bad enough that she threw an epic tantrum and literally ran off and hurt herself, but it's even worse that everyone but Hiccup is determined to act like it's ok. "But aren't you supposed to be on bed-rest?" He looks critically at the injured leg, braced and held aloft between crutches that still feel foreign and impossible under her arms.

"Oh, I am," she hobbles into the room, sitting carefully in a leather chair in the corner, feeling a little too much like she's reporting to the principal's office after some embarrassing indiscretion. "The bedroom ceiling got boring, so I'm thinking I'll spend a few hours staring at the living room ceiling." He laughs and she ducks her head, for once understanding the double edged sword of situational deprecation.

"Sounds like a solid plan." He sits back a bit, pushing an official looking document halfway across the desk and looking at her with more of his full attention than she really wants at this embarrassing juncture.

"Soâ€|I shouldn't have yelled at you the other night. It was out of line, and I'm sorry," she blurts it out in one breath, chewing on the inside of her cheek and waiting for the response like a jury is about to sentence her.

"I know this is hard," he says carefully, in that fatherly tone that always feels like a hug she didn't necessarily ask for, but doesn't have the gall to shove off. "But you've got to give yourself time to heal."

"I learned that lesson the hard way," she laughs, looking back down through her brace's nylon framed window and loathing the black and blue bruise staring back at her with remarkable malice. "Not my proudest moment." She looks at him carefully for a moment, leaning

forward onto an elbow anchored on her good knee and continuing.
"Hiccup—he's still mad, but _someone_ should know how this happened," she grins, "it's actually sort of funny."

"A funny injury?" And it's an eerie mirror of Hiccup coming home with scraped knees, covered in mud, trying to explain that it's actually hilarious that he fell down the stream trying to catch a frog.

He still can't believe how much the two kids have rubbed off on each other these last four years, what with Hiccup walking taller, sturdier on one foot than he ever was on two, and Astrid softening around the edges, directing her blade outwards instead of persistently in.

"I was walking with Ruff out of the dining hall," she starts with a blush that he's kind enough to ignore, "and we were teasing each other and just generally being idiots—and I tried to _jog_, which apparently isn't possible for me anymore," she stops to laugh, envisioning this situation as a movie playing in her mind, "and I wipe out onto the floor and teach the dining staff a few new swear words," she finishes with an embarrassed laugh, scooting to get a bit more comfortable in the chair. "Not to mention when people tried to help, Ruff tore into them like she was _hungry_."

Gerard laughs at that, reaching up to loosen his tie as it becomes a bit restrictive around his throat. He hadn't expected to be laughing today, what with the chilled atmosphere pervasive in the house this morning, and his dismal meeting earlier in the afternoon.

"That's quite the explanation."

"It gets better," she smiles at her feet, "I was laying there, cursing to make _Gobber_ blush, and Ruff is trying to not puke, because apparently swelling grosses her out, and I'm trying not to pass out from the pain," her head hangs heavy and shakes slowly. "It was _exciting_."

"Sounds like it," a chuckle slips out. "I'd say that's punishment enough, without your knee going back out on you."

"I'm—yeah. It wasn't pretty, but I still needed to apologize properly," she nods resolutely and looks him in the eye for one of the first times since she worked up the courage to come in here. "That was really—bad."

"Apology accepted," and the worst part is, she's pretty sure it was accepted before she even came in here. She hates being hurt, the excuses, the gentle tone, the way that Hiccup touches her like she's going to break, even when he's too mad to talk to her.

She craves that accountability she's built up this last four years, the weight of her own responsibility on her shoulders, rather than floating up on some cloud of still unreasonably strong pain-killers.

The atmosphere of the room feels calmed, almost soothing despite the other topic weighing on her mind and she tests the water, drumming her fingers on the arm rest of the chair.

"I had something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yes?" He asks, looking nervous enough to awaken a flare of guilt in her chest and she swallows hard, frowning at a spot on the rug that may have been mud or coffee long ago, and hasn't since been convinced to leave.

"It's not_ bad_ or anything, it's justâ€" the prefacing feels face, like pinning ribbons onto a completed work in an effort to hide its raw lines and she sighs, wiping a hand over her face. "I realized that I'm probably going to be with your son forever."

"You just realized that now?" Gerard asks, obviously amused and Astrid glowers at him. "I've known sinceâ€|well, Gobber knew before me, he was sure of it as soon as Hiccup strutted back into school holding your hand, but I've known sinceâ€|I don't know, four years maybe?" He muses and she blushes an impossibly darker crimson.

"I'm here to make sure you're ok with it," she mutters, once again avoiding eye contact, glaring out the window at a bird that appears to be suddenly offensive. "I meanâ€|it seems like a decision that I should let you know about."

"Are you asking me for Henry's hand in marriage?" Gerard teases, green eyes lighting up so much like his son's. Astrid blushes and shakes her head .

"Noâ€|not like, Iâ€|" she grunts, frustrated at the stutter escaping her grasp and sighing slowly. "Do you think he's ok with it? Is it ridiculous that I'm deciding this now? I'm 22, it seems like I should have all thisâ€|desire to play the field, but I'm perfectly alright where I am," the pause is loaded and Astrid chews her lip, deciding that if she's already in this deep, then she might as well plow forward the rest of the way into mortification. "I'm more than alright, even when Hiccup is pissed off beyond belief at me, I stillâ€|When I look forward, and I'm fifty, or seventy, or a hundred, Hiccup is right there pissing me off and making me laugh and bringing home strays andâ€|It just doesn't make sense any other way anymore."

"When Henry was a freshman in high school," the man starts fondly, and Astrid wonders if her little explosion got lost in translation somewhere around the way. "I had to go to the school for something, I don't remember, I think he needed something signed," the man thinks hard, "and he was waiting outside the office, back when he was a hundred pounds soaking wet," Astrid has to smile at that, thinking back to the bony wrists and ribs pervasive through the first few months together. "And he was staring off into spaceâ€|"

"Because he's _Hiccup_," Astrid interjects with a grin.

"Exactly, and I tried to get his attention, impatient like I always used to be," Gerard smiles sadly and Astrid resists a strong strange urge to comfort him. "And he's not staring into space, he's staring at this girl who's talking and glaring at this guy twice her size." She blushes as she starts to feel out where this is going, guilty and flattered all at once like every time she remembers how many more years he's spent invested. "And I asked him who it was, and he told me it was Astrid Hofferson, and I asked why he didn't go talk to youâ€|"

"Probably he was afraid I'd beat him up," she glowers at the floor, and the hand that broke his wrist, and the feet that let her think it was ok because they were fast.

"He said you'd never notice him." Even if he means it as a sweet story, it's a barb to the heart and Astrid hugs herself around the middle, curling forward slightly. "And I told him to be noticeable."

"What kind of advice is that?" She smirks, "All he had to do was beat him, in the end."

"Exactly," Gerard shrugs. "I would have thought he'd need to put himself out there."

"He put himself out there enough for me to break his arm," she frowns and he shrugs.

"Hiccup's not still mad about that."

"I am though," and it's a father-daughter talk she's never had, awkward and pure. "I'm always going to be mad at myself about that."

"Val would have liked you," the man smiles. "Well, at first she would have hated you, for breaking his arm, you probably would have gotten a visit or two from a fury in a minivan." Astrid has to laugh at that, cautiously looking up from her lap. "But then she would have seen how much Hiccup liked you, and would have come around."

"That's good to know," Astrid nods quietly. "I think my mom would have liked Hiccup. My she had issues with sarcasm, I'd be a constant translator, but I think under all that confusion she really would have liked him."

"So, are you two thinking about grandkids yet?" He asks after a quiet moment, mostly for the pleasure of seeing Astrid blush and sputter, sitting up stick straight in her chair.

"I'm 22."

"I was 26 when Henry was born," he reminds her with raised eyebrows and Astrid reaches for her crutches, choosing to exit gracefully from the conversation rather than sit here and be forced to think about crying, wrinkly babies with big green eyes that make her deeply uncomfortable.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she cautions with a flighty smile, the closeness of the last few minutes evaporating into a strangely more comfortable edge. "I'm going to bed rest," she nods carefully and hobbles back out of the room, sparing him one last glance over her shoulder.

Gerard tries not to be outwardly ecstatic that someday, he'll be able to play a successful game of catch with his grandkids.

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**Let's be completely honest, I love this chapter. I love the

Fishlegs, and I love the Ruff, and I love the so so awkward hospital visit and Hiccup being so awkwardly furious. And then the bromance, I'm pretty sure that Astrid/Jerry bromance is my favorite thing in the world, and I adored the awkward father/daughter type conversation here. Not trying to toot my own horn, I promise, I'm just really excited about everything that happens here.**

**Also! For anyone who's interested, the sequel to Becoming Lifbrasir is now posted, it's called Winter in Lif's Holt, and it's wonderful, and you all should go read it. Because it's great. **

Don't forget to stop and leave a review!

19. Chapter 19

**Yeah, it's almost the end of May and I want to be done with this thing. Sorry, loooooong chapter ahead. **

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Sometimes Astrid wishes she had painkillers to get through bedrest, because it's frankly way worse than actual pain. The ceiling is boring, Spike got tired of listening to her talk and fell asleep an hour ago in full doggy fetal position at the foot of the bed. She could go for a drink, to be honest, something to make her mind more whimsical and less bogged down by stiff muscles and an obvious lack of Hiccup.

He still hasn't talked to her.

Not really, not anything beyond checking in with that nervous nurse face that does something uncomfortable to her insides.

He's better at a despicably peaceful silent treatment than she could ever hope to be.

She turns her head to the side, just giving her neck something to do and her eyes catch on the top of her dresser. That cross country nationals trophy gleams down at her defiantly from under its layer of dust, somehow smug and triumphant. That's the team trophy, top ten, which was really saying something considering the field last year and CU's unusually large group of untried freshmen.

Astrid got second, overall. It was by a hair, photo finish, but she lost because of a stumble in the third mile that fractured her momentum apparently beyond recovery.

That silver is hanging on the opposite wall, with her Worlds' accolades and everything else shiny that she managed to pick up through the years. Probably a couple hundred metals in all, given all of those high school scrimmages handing out spray painted scraps on lanyards. Her state win from senior year, when everything was different, dangling purposefully front and center next to the regional win from a few weeks later, when it seemed like nothing would ever finish changing.

She can feel their gloss burning into the back of her neck like critical stares, marking every event with a dimming gold star, sun faded and outdated. That silver from a less successful Worlds in

Spain, remind her of anxious international calls to Hiccup's father while he sat with Spike at the vet. The dog got into chocolate somehow, a bar left on a counter during her and Hiccup's packing flurry, and Astrid spent that whole 5k worried about her.

There's cross country nationals, third place bronze, from her sophomore year, when she and Hiccup got absolutely trashed on peach schnapps after her race. She spent half the night holding his hair out of his eyes after he thought it'd be a good idea to mix his stomach with an order of room service hot wings.

There's NCAA track finals from a year ago, all gold foil and glitz, reminding her of those long training runs over spring break in Arizona while Hiccup slept in. God, the receptionist's face when they brought Toothless into the hotel lobby to check in, it looked like she was about to have a heart attack.

She can't separate herself from it. There's no event or moment where her sport wasn't lurking somewhere in her brain, stubborn and dutiful. Not a weekend she didn't plan around pacing runs or mileage. Not a day she didn't spend gearing up for a race or relaxing satisfied sore muscles.

The small glossy figure frozen mid-step on top of her trophy glares down at her, denying any resemblance that they ever had. It suddenly starts to feel like she's in someone else's room. Someone successful. Someone _strong_.

Her bad foot bumps against Spike's haunch as she rolls out of bed, wincing at the shooting pain that drives her new inadequacy home like a well aimed arrow. It seems futile to reach for her crutches and worry about the pain, but Hiccup's disappointed face flashes through her mind and convinces her to tuck one close to her side, limping lopsided to her dresser. The trophy feels foreign and too special in her shaking fingers, a museum artifact in the hands of a thief, and she yanks open her drawer of winter sweaters, pressing the totem between the stacks until all she can see is a lone chrome foot jutting back at her.

She places an old blue sweater over the evidence and closes the drawer as silently as she can manage, pretending that there's nothing amiss, and nothing just happened.

The medals come down next, landing in an oversized shoebox like buried treasure with her well loved racing spikes, tucked far into the back of her closet. Her running shoes go deep under the bed, hidden by dust bunnies and made unreachable by too short arms. Pictures of her team, of her winning, of she and Hiccup after a meet, they all come down, hiding in an empty dresser drawer.

The walls are bare, and it feels better, like spring cleaning. Astrid Hofferson isn't painted over everything, perfect and secure. A winner.

But it's remarkably sad, just how little is left. One picture of Spike, smiley and a darker gray than her salt and pepper face is now. A note Hiccup left in her things once, sweet and crinkled, hanging on a lonely bulletin board. A clean pair of shoes she's never worn sitting in solitary at the front of her closet.

It looks like a guestroom, as blank and comfortingly generic as when she first moved in.

Astrid sighs and starts to climb back into bed, working up the will to wake a now snoring Spike who has sprawled across dead center of her mattress. Something in Hiccup's room, straight across the hall, catches her eye and she pauses, sitting up a little straighter.

He's not exactly a decorator, and his walls are covered in sketches he plans to build held up with strips of clear tape. There are two pictures in his room. A picture of her scowling that he likes for some reason she doesn't understand is taped above his dresser, and a miraculously framed shot of them sits on his nightstand. It's staring at her with that miraculous Astrid Hofferson energy, everything she just cleared out of her room displaced and crammed into a single image.

She limps across the hallway on her single crutch, perching on the edge of Hiccup's unmade bed and picking up the picture frame. It's probably the cleanest thing in his room, dust free and so carefully placed that it almost feels like an intrusion to be looking at it.

She's seventeen in the photo, skinny and baby-faced, just coming back from that first Nationals. He's gimpy on a first run prosthetic, equal parts nervous and happy on the airport tile. Even though they'd only been them for six weeks, her arms already look right around his shoulders, forehead fitting into his chest like a long lost puzzle piece.

Gobber probably took the picture in secret, amassing evidence to prove her then still questionable humanity.

That weekend was the first significant time they were ever apart, and she can still remember the weight of her third place shame lifting from her chest when she saw him standing nervously by the baggage claim.

She was wearing that Berk cross country sweatshirt, the one she had so long it wore through at the seams. Gobber brought her a new one for Christmas last year, but it's a different blend, and it doesn't quite feel right against her skin.

Maybe it's the skin that's different.

She's suddenly looking at a picture of someone else, that same defiant someone else who just proved so hard to put away.

Her fingers tremble against the latch on the back of the frame, and she imagines placing the photo with the rest in that hidden drawer. She imagines Hiccup finding the empty frame and how upset that would make him.

The bed lurches underneath her and she clutches the picture protectively, flinching as a cold, wet nose and long hot tongue nudge against the back of her neck. Her arm reaches out and wraps reflexively around Toothless' furry neck as he plops down happily beside her, lone front paw hanging off the mattress as he rests his angular chin on her knee.

"Hey handsome," she greets the wolf, rubbing behind his ears and setting the photo back on the nightstand. Something electric and too familiar ripples along her spine and she sits up a little straighter, staring holes into her hand. "Not going to jump on the handsome thing?" She looks over her shoulder at Hiccup, predictably looming in the doorway. "Normally you get all jealous until I call you handsome too."

"I don't get jealous," he insists, teasing even through that layer of insidious politeness. "Why are you looking at my picture?" He asks, lingering awkwardly by the foot of the bed. His expression hovers somewhere between no longer angry and ready to make up, and she looks down at her feet.

"Do you mind if I put it away?"

"Yes, I mind," he paces in front of her and picks up the frame, staring at it so fondly it feels like there's not enough air left in the room. "This is my favorite picture of us."

"I'm wearing my old cross country sweatshirt," she mutters, crossing one arm over her stomach while her other continues stroking at Toothless' long, soft fur.

"Yeahâ€¦" he agrees, obviously confused. "Why does that mean you have to put the picture away?"

"Cross country is mocking me." The words are too quiet, a ripple on the surface when she wants a tidal wave. She bites her lip and tries to pull her face into some semblance of stoic.

"It's mocking you?" He sounds worried, and she feels six years old again, asking her parents to check under the bed for monsters.

"It's everywhere, and I don't want to look at it," she snaps, lurching to her good foot and tucking her lone crutch under her arm to lean on. "I don't like seeing me running everywhere, itâ€¦" she pauses, stuck in the flood lamp of those searing green eyes. "It feels like someone died."

"You sound like you're giving up," he frowns, placing the picture frame back into its original position on his nightstand.

"Kneeâ€¦" she shrugs, unable to form the excuse into a sentence as her throat thickens. She manages enough of a smile to slip around him, limping towards the door. "I'll leave you to it."

Spike is awake and contemplating visiting Hiccup when Astrid limps back into her room, and she lingers by the door for a second to give the dog a chance to leave. Spike lays back down, smiling nervously from the foot of the bed.

At least she has Spike.

Astrid shuts the door and curls back up in her bed rest roost, sighing in relief as she elevates her knee on its stack of pillows and relieves that strange, uncomfortable pressure.

Someone did die. Astrid the runner, Astrid the capable. Astrid the girl who had so much to be proud of.

All those facets of that all-dominating Astrid Hofferson died.

She's not exactly sure what's left behind.

Astrid doesn't register the tears leaking down her cheeks until Spike is licking them off, nervous paw anchored lovingly against her shoulder.

"Oh, hey," she hugs the dog's muscular neck, clearing her throat in an attempt to get rid of that horribly wet and weak croak that has replaced her voice. "I'm alright, girl! "bleck!" She grimaces as Spike's tongue sneaks into the corner of her mouth. "No frenching! No! "I'm! "I'll be fine, sweetie. Ok, ack, thank you," a sloppy, wet laugh sneaks out through the tears, almost more pathetic than the fact that she's crying in the first place. "Ah! The kisses, the kisses," she laughs in earnest, pulling Spike closer into her chest and trying to thwart their wrestling before it gets her knee involved.

Finally, Spike lays down, tucking herself close to Astrid's good leg like a fifth, slightly unruly limb. Astrid's hand finds her floppy soft ears, playing with the sensitive fold and letting Spike's thumping tail be the only sound in the room.

It's more of a funeral than an injury.

And the deceased's estate is an absolute nightmare .

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Spike's clinginess does nothing but make Astrid feel worse about her absence. The pit doesn't leave her side, sleeping with her head on the same pillow and waking her girl every two hours with slapping, excited licks to the nose. By Monday morning, Toothless has joined in the bed rest fun, but he seems less innocent and more drawn close by Astrid's inability to walk away from his demands for belly rubs.

"Guys!" Astrid snaps around noon on Monday, grabbing Toothless's lone front paw and rolling him away from her lap and onto his side. He squirms and plants his chin on her shin, tail thumping the table as he starts squirming back to show her his belly. Spike paws at his stomach, earnest and demanding until he reluctantly rolls away from Astrid's side, and the pit slithers into his place. "Yes, Spike, I love you most," Astrid groans, scratching the dog's ears and trying to position her laptop comfortably across her wildly uncomfortable lap. "Alright, doing something, can you give me fifteen minutes?"

But it's really hard to be peeved with those dual sets of bright eyes staring up at her.

She sighs, scratching under Spike's pale purple collar and turning back to the computer, studying the next question on her current job application.

Manager at the grocery store. It's not a dream, exactly, but it doesn't seem like there are many job opportunities floating around for pre-law English majors who don't have that law degree. At least

this one doesn't have _assistant_ in the title, like the last five she's filled out for _administrative assistant_ positions.

She can still go to grad school, on the side. It'll be a year before law school is a possibility, because she hasn't taken or even really considered LSAT's because she was so busy with running and classes. It'll take longer, but she'll get it done.

Sheâ€|she has to, doesn't she? It's like driving down a dark road at night. Everything is equally dark from a distance, the whole landscape could be dotted and streaked with safe asphalt paths, an infinite number of directions and decisions. But she's on a road, and it's going straight out to the horizon, and if she happened to get a flat tire, she'd walk straight until morning.

Other people seem to have this amazing ability to pivot, turning on a dime and trying a new heading, maneuvering through life like it's some sort of dodging and weaving game. Astrid knows how to go fast, and she knows how to go forward, and it seems like fast has been ripped out from under her and cast aside. Her knee throbs irritably under the covers, prying and pressing against the pillow propping it up like it's trying to escape its wrappings. The brace seems unnecessary just for lying here, and the two times Hiccup checked on her before leaving this morning, he didn't slow to glare at her knee, so she's assuming it's alright with him.

He hasn't said three words to her since the photo incident that aren't asking her if she needs something. This is horrible, she almost wishes she'd stayed at school. At least Ruff finds humor in the situation.

Mostly she's sitting here wondering how she managed to be half of a situation that even Hiccup doesn't find funny.

Because it's sort of funny, it really is. Someone told her to sit down, she didn't listen, and her knee practically exploded. It's funny because she's been warned about listening her entire life, while she considered as long as she got everything done adequately, nothing else would really matter. It's funny because she's always been relatively good at following physical orders. Run. Run faster. Stop. And the first time someone tells her to hold still, she fell off of the rails and destroyed her career.

She glances around at her bare walls and sighs, seeing the ghost of their decoration in her mind. At least she can _pretend_ to think about something else now.

It's pure comedy that she was being offered this miraculous second chance of sorts with Nike, and her own out of character nervous excitement shot that gift horse in the face. She was so determined to make something work that it fell through the cracks, dodging the demolished rubber band holding it together and disappearing like it was never there.

It's goddamn hilarious that she's gone from a cohesive athlete to a collection of jumbled limbs that don't feel like they fit together, the odd man out now a violent traitor, Benedict Arnold sent to the firing squad while they still needed his help.

She just can't stop laughing.

So funny.

It's a goddamn riot.

And this job application is another humorous piece to the puzzle, asking such upbeat questions about managing a grocery store. Why do you want this job? What would make you a valuable addition to our community?

She wants desperately to write the truth, just puke the truth out onto the screen like a big red blot on her only application that doesn't assign her as someone's assistant something.

She doesn't want this job. She's applying because she had big aspirations for grad school on a sort of unreliable source of income, and she fucked herself and now she needs someone to pay her. She needs money, and she'll show up and tell kids where to put things on shelves if they pay her for it. She has a college degree, as of May, and she knows how they like having those statistics thrown into their company demographic, so if they hire her, she promises to be college educated.

Instead she types in some insipid answer about helping her community and working close by school, as well as a sickening willingness to work nights.

At least she won't be running anymore, so she'll have endless energy.

She won't be running anymore.

It's starting to sink in, basic and bitter on the back of her tongue, possibility teasing her in the antsy muscles of her good leg. She's not going to run again, most likely. It'll be weeks before she trusts this knee, but even longer until Hiccup trusts her assessment of her knee, and by then her lungs will beâ€|normal. She'll be one of those people who are out of breath at the top of the stairs, and all of that world champion grit and glamour will be a distant memory.

For the past few weeks, as hard as it's been to be laid up, her own incapability never seemed real. Sure, she had issues walking up the stairs, but it was a that-day, one-time sort of issue, never something that was permanent. She figured as soon as she started training, she'd bounce back, and her knee would heal with the exercise, just like Hiccup told her. Wasn't the blood flow supposed to help? Wasn't it supposed to bring down swelling and raise endorphin levels to keep her happy and comfortable?

It wasn't supposed to make everything worse, but it did.

And she knows she overdid it. She knows that she pushed too hard and expected too much too soon. But she doesn't know how else to do this, she doesn't know how to take it slowly or gently. Her entire life, the response to pain was hard work, it was speed and stretching and pushing until she'd won and the pain was insignificant and fading.

It's not working like that anymore, and she's uncomfortable with this playing field.

"Hmm, Spike, what do you think?" She sighs, scratching the dog's head with one hand and tapping at her laptop keyboard with the other. "What are my greatest weaknesses? Do I see myself working at a grocery store in five years?" The questions are more frightening than they really should be and she can't seem to make up anything to fill the empty space.

Spike groans and licks at Toothless's paw while the wolf smiles at the attention, rolling back enough to hopefully show Astrid his chest.

"Oh, so in five years, I'm your designated chest rubber?" It's a better solution than anything else, and that's terrifying, even if it's meant as a joke. She could do that, and she knows it. Get a job for now, wait until Hiccup is out of school.

Marry him.

Pop out 2.3 kids and start that suburban existence.

While it's not as horrible as it once would have seemed, it's notâ€|_her_. She can't be happy as someone's wife, her occupation socially determined and walled into a corner. She can't be happy without running, not without changing everything, not without redefining what happy feels like.

"Does that feel good?" She asks quietly as Toothless's back leg starts to kick, tongue lolling out of his mouth in a dopey grin. Spike quickly gets jealous of the attention, scooping Astrid's other hand onto her snout with a forceful nudge, almost knocking the girl's computer to the floor. "Heyâ€|hey, careful," she sets the laptop aside to warm her pillow and bends forward as far as she can, luxuriating in the lower back stretch while Spike licks her shoulder and Toothless squirms under fingers on his stomach. "You guys are a mess. Absolutely a mess," Astrid manages a laugh as she runs twin hands over both dogs' appreciative rib cages, drowning herself in a pile of kicking feet and flapping tongues. "We all are. Completely," her sigh feels heavy, some dense condensation of hard work and dreams leaking out to melt into the air.

Someone knocks on the open door frame and her head snaps up to see Hiccup looking a little put out in Toothless's general direction.

"Way to come say hi, bud, I feel loved," he gripes, face splitting into a reluctant smile as the wolf slinks off of the bed and trots over, rearing up and planting a large front paw on his boy's shoulder. "Sorry," Hiccup says over the wolf's head, almost making eye contact in a painful extension of that absolutely frigid cold shoulder, "just wondering where he was."

"Don't apologize," Astrid shrugs, sitting back up as Spike jumps down to join Toothless at Hiccup's feet, wagging hello. "They were helping me a bit too much anyway," she pulls her computer back onto her lap and leans back to get comfortable against the pillows.

"Paper?" He asks, hands petting Toothless's shoulders as the wolf licks at the underside of his chin. He tries to escape the tongue and Toothless drops to the floor, face radiating under-appreciation as he

jumps back onto Astrid's bed and curls up against her leg, staring at Hiccup with oddly hopeful eyes.

"Job applications," Astrid nods slowly, face falling.

"What kind of jobs?" And the small, mincing step forward into her room feels like a victory.

"Just random jobs. Mostly night stuff, because I'm still hoping to go to school during the day."

Hiccup frowns at her answer, clunky and uncomfortable in the face of that down-trodden, decidedly aimless tone.

"During the summer?"

"To start," she shrugs, turning to the screen with a wry and miserable smile. "But this one is stumping me. 'What are your greatest weaknesses?' Why do they need to know that for a grocery store job?"

"A grocery store job?" He raises an eyebrow, trying to imagine Astrid as one of those haggard people in grungy uniforms stocking shelves in the middle of the night and failing miserably.

"Night stuff," she repeats, his veiled disdain hitting home. "I guessâ€¦I figured there'd be money, you know? All those offers after nationals and worlds andâ€¦I didn't bank on it drying up."

"This could still work with Nike," but he doesn't do a good job even pretending to be excited and Astrid sighs, turning eyes back to her computer and wishing that Hiccup would take his lofty promises into the other room. Toothless sits up and licks her forehead, drawing a reluctant laugh out of her as her arm wraps around his broad shoulders and tugs him into her side.

"Bed rest, Hiccup, I can't even walk," another laugh leaks out, nonsensical and odd. "Maybe that's my greatest weakness. I can't walk."

"Astridâ€¦"

"No, no, I like this game," she scratches the top of the wolf's head. "Umm, hmm, more weaknesses. I don't plan ahead. If I did I'd be looking for a real job right now instead of trying to fund more school. The world has enough lawyers. Oh! I'm really good at alienating people who care about me, that's a real talentâ€¦"

"Astridâ€¦"

"My apologies suck. Really, they do. I mean, I thought I had saying 'sorry' down, but I've said it to you three times and you don't really seem to understand me. Maybe I have an accent I haven't noticed yet orâ€¦" Spike jumps onto the bed, sensing her girl's distress and closing the laptop handily, with a momentarily almost human paw. "Girl, come on," Astrid sputters as the pit tries to push her back, climbing on top of her lap to curl into a comforting and pointy, sixty pound ball of elbows.

Hiccup takes the opportunity to take the two steps to her bedside, swallowing baseless pride and sitting down beside her. She hugs Spike and looks at the bedspread as he tentatively pulls her computer from her lap and sets it on the floor.

Toothless jumps down and curls up on his foot.

"Astrid," he says quietly, at a loss for anything else, hand hovering an inch off the blankets as he debates whether to grab her hand. She moves for him, one golden arm unfurling from around Spike and almost daintily setting her fingers in his. "Do you want to know what I think is your greatest weakness?"

"What?"

"You're so goddamn strong," he pauses and frowns. "And no, that doesn't make any sense, but allâ€" he waves a hand at her, "you don't feel pain like normal people do, and you keep going andâ€"honestly, Astrid, you're a workman's comp nightmare. No grocery store would ever hire you." He shakes his head, faking lament and she sighs.

"Workman's comp?" She asks, feeling dumb on top of everything else.

"Oh, thatâ€"well, that shoots my joke in the foot," he laughs to himself, slowly lacing his fingers through hers. "That's where someone gets hurt at work and the company has to pay."

"Right, probably shouldn't be applying for jobs on my feet," Astrid's arm curls a little more tightly around the dog on her lap. The hand that's intertwined with Hiccup's feels detached from the rest of her, floating on the other side of some happy, warm barrier.

"What do you mean?" He asks, thumb stroking over her knuckles with that gap-toothed grin peering into her soul. He's trying to joke with her and she wonders if it's genuine, or if it's something put on for her benefit. Is he trying to make her feel better, biding his time until he can return to that drawn back façade and wait for her toâ€"she doesn't know.

She doesn't know what she's supposed to do.

"I was just walking and itâ€"gave out," she glares at her bandaged knee, a slightly bloated looking lump under the covers. "I don'tâ€"I don't trust it."

"You didn't give it time to heal," the hand tests its luck without his express consent, sliding up her arm and around her shoulders. Spike leans back into him, obviously content with twice the lap underneath her.

"Can you stop?" Astrid snips, leaning forward in a weak attempt to shake his arm off of her. "You're mad and now you're in here trying to make me feel better and it'sâ€"it's conflicting, alright?"

"Iâ€" He repositions Spike with careful fingers and moves to scoot away, no matter how much he wants to move closer. "You don't like me taking care of you."

It's not a question or an accusation, just simple and cutting.

"No. I don't."

"Why?" He asks, and for the first time Astrid can hear that he's genuinely hurt. It strikes an odd chord in her chest, different and crueler than when she fully believed that he was babying her out of mistrust along with love.

"Do you like taking care of me?"

It's a question worth asking, isn't it? Isn't this an entirely different situation if he was somehow enjoying theâ€|the smothering?

"You don't make it easy."

"That doesn't answer my question," she holds out, skin prickling against the stubborn arm still resting against the back of her neck.

"You didn't answer mine." He's still stubborn beneath all the hurt and Astrid bites her lip, trying to think of anything worth saying. The first thing that pops into her head hardly ever is, and she takes a second to dig for a real answer here.

Why doesn't she like him taking care of her?

"I feel useless, and slow andâ€|I don't like that," she shrugs, and his hand is big and warm and familiar, curled around her upper arm.

"So it's not me?" He frowns.

"It's worse that it's you," it's somehow embarrassing to admit and her voice drops, fingers stroking against the side of Spike's soft face and lulling her quiet.

"I like taking care of you," Hiccup shrugs and she sinks a little against him, sliding down use loose sheets to press almost uncomfortably against his side. "When you're not yelling at me. Which is a lot of the time, I'll admit."

"You don'tâ€|"I don't want to sound insensitive hereâ€|"

"Right, that just comes naturally to youâ€|"ouch," he flinches from her sudden punch to the arm.

"You don't know what this is like, really." She gestures to her knee and looks at him for anything angry and hurt, and upon finding no concerning new glints in his eyes, continues. "Youâ€|your foot is gone, butâ€|If you were in a wheelchair, it would suck. You'd have to spend way too much time finding ramps, and it'd be hard to reach counters, but you're you and you'd adapt. No matter what you lose physically, you're going to be able toâ€|to do what you need to do." She stops and stares at her feet, one propped and shoved slightly sideways by the thick blankets. Spike's weight on her lap is starting to tax the knee, pulling at the sprained tendon and making it feel unreasonably warm, but she can't bear to kick the dog off just yet. "Not what you want to do, what you need to do."

Her bare walls are an eyesore, blindingly obvious.

"Astrid, you're going to get better."

"But it's never going to be the same again," she shakes her head, and it hurts to say this out loud impossibly more than it hurts to hold it inside. "It's just not. And I obviously don't know how to rehab anything. I already pushed it so hard that it broke. Again."

"It'll be fine, every doctor has said that it will heal fineâ€¦if you listen to them," that earns him a sharp glare over her shoulder, "which you are. I'm impressed with your bed rest abilities. You're a pro."

"Why thank you," she manages a quick laugh. "Butâ€¦it's not just my knee. I'm different, Hiccup. Thisâ€¦" she sighs and leans down far enough to kiss the crown of Spike's head before pulling back far enough to mutter clearly. "I'm different. I don't trust my body, that's never happened to me before it was always justâ€¦reliable. And," she sits up straight, looking down disappointed. "And my entire body changed, too, it'sâ€¦I've been reading and it was probably all the running that sort of shut things down butâ€¦I've never looked like this before. And it's not going anywhere, even when I lost weight."

"Well, I like it," he grins at her, not disregarding her obvious distress. She smiles like he's not quite getting it, chewing on her lip and trying to rephrase herself.

"I was thirteen when I started running, Hiccup. That's nine years where every single day I went and ran, and now I'mâ€¦" she opens her mouth twice, trying to continue and faltering before her words gain traction again on her tongue. "I've had running forever, before I knew you or Spike, before I knew Scott. Everything is built upon this platform where I run and I'm a runner, and I don't know what I am if I'm not a runner anymore."

She's not a runner anymore, is she? She's something dried up and tired andâ€¦not what she used to be.

She's different, and everyone seems to be prepared for it except for her.

That part of her is dead, and the rest of her is irreparable.

"You're still you, justâ€¦" slower. He doesn't finish that sentence. "So you look different, who cares? Spike misses you just as much when you go. You're still the only person on the planet who distracts Toothless from running to see me the second I get home."

"You're already the dog whisperer, unless you're giving me your identity, here."

"You have your own identity."

"Not withoutâ€¦the running part," she mumbles, oddly ashamed and Hiccup frowns.

"Hmm. Running wasn't even the first thing I noticed about you," he admits quietly, thinking back to ninth grade and everything he thought he'd never have. "I think I noticed the way you held yourself." Which is even more shocking now, knowing what she went through at home, that she'd strut into school like that, chin held high and completely disguising her slight stature.

"So, I have good posture. Whatever."

"And you're the hardest worker I've ever known," he tries. She looks a little smug as she shrugs that compliment off.

"Good posture, hard worker. This doesn't sound like an identity."

"Let's seeâ€|" he leans back against her propped up mountain of pillows, pulling her towards his chest, heart fluttering when her temple lands against his shoulder. Spike sprawls out and bumps a stretched foot against Astrid's knee and she flinches for a second before relaxing with a slow, even exhale. "You don't feel pain. I could club you in the back and you'd probably laugh at me."

"Trust me, I feel pain."

"Well, your pain tolerance is still insane," he corrects. "And you're one of the most empathetic people I've ever met."

"Come on, now you're just being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. Not at all. You know when I'm up to something before I do, you've got this little Astrid brand CCTV in my brain or something. And you always know what I'm feelingâ€|even if you rarely know why," he finishes and she smiles grudgingly against his shoulder.

"Good posture, hard working, tough, half-perceptive," she catalogues the qualities, obviously more satisfied even as she searches for more.

"And you're genuinely sweet without trying," he offers and she wrinkles her nose.

"Ok. I get itâ€|just give me some time here."

"You'll be running again in no time." He's sincere, and it's oddly inspiring.

"You never answered my question."

"I erâ€|yeah, I forgot what your question was," her hand thwacks his chest, so normal and utterly comfortable.

"Do you really _like_ taking care of me?" she repeats, nervous at the immediately too long pause. "I know that you probably don't, because I'mâ€|"

"Stupidly stubborn?" He fills in the rest of her sentence and she shrugs into him, forehead pressing against the side of his neck. "I do like taking care of youâ€|"really, I do."

"What? Because it makes you feel all manly and you get to carry me around?"

"Because you took care of me," his voice drops a bit and she shuts her mouth, lips touching against his shoulder distractedly warm. "And I hated you taking care of me—but I was always glad it was you over someone else."

"Oh—Hiccup, I—umm," she pauses, trying to figure out the words and coming up short. "I just don't like you seeing me like this."

"I've seen worse," his knee nudges against her hand and her fingers slip from Spike's hip to rest on his thigh, more comfortable in the closeness. "And even though I didn't even really know you when I first lost my leg, I'm really glad you did take care of me." It should sound like some sort of goading, or a behind the knees blow, but it's sincere and settles in her chest. "And—I don't understand why you hate _me_ taking care of you."

"Because it's not—attractive or endearing. It's probably boring for you, definitely exhausting. You're busy enough without me needing _everything_," she glances sideways at those dark circles under his eyes, somehow more apparent since she left. "And I'm not—I'm unpredictable, I'm meaner than normal and more _pathetic_ and—" The words run out before her feelings do and she exhales, relaxing against the pillows.

"Well, next time, at least use some violence or something, the gentle shove away was a bit rough," he admits and she frowns.

"What do you mean the gentle shove?"

"You should have just been—straight with me. Because I would have told you that you're crazy and taken care of you anyway," his smile is muted and a bit opaque, "because I know how you love insults and forced attention."

"Excuse me for trying to be _tactful_."

"Not going to lie, it hurt," and he's a little more open, a rare brave face splitting.

Hiccup rarely puts up a front, he always seems to be actually better, legitimately brave and strong while she's always keenly aware of all of those personal insecurities beneath her strong jawed façade. Her concern is aimed towards the greater good, channeling her own emotions away from the current situation, while Hiccup is so much more self-contained and personally determined.

It's rough to know that he's been _pretending_.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were hurt, I didn't want you to deal with it."

"I didn't want you to deal with me being messed up in the head," she nestles her face into his shoulder as Spike seems to get suddenly uncomfortable, standing and flopping onto the bottom corner of the bag with a grumble.

"I don't mind dealing with it," he insists with a wry smile, "ever think this might be one of those times when handing over a little bit of the control wouldn't hurt you?"

"Never," she smiles, biting her lip as a dangerous idea slips to the front of her mind. "But if you did happen to have any ideas that don't involve applying for any more horrible jobs, I might be receptive."

"You might?" He raises his eyebrows, hand tightening slightly around her bicep. The firmness it had gained back during her week of over-training has mostly melted with her days of bed rest, and as much as she must hate it, something about the unusual softness makes him want to protect her. "Because I don't think that it's necessarily time to give up on Nike."

"Hiccup—" She moves to sit up, to worm away from the deep comfort and avoid all chance of Hiccup's unusual brand of closeness clouding and perturbing her thoughts, but he keeps her still with a hand that doesn't struggle quite enough against her arm.

God, she should at least be doing curls in here or something, she's going soft abominably fast.

"I'm just saying, it's a first contract. They're almost always willing to accept a few edits," he shrugs and it's almost smooth when he tugs her closer to him, until her shoulder digs too hard into his ribs and he coughs. "At least that's what my dad said, he has a friend who works with copyright issues with Gatorade, and most of those athletes only accept a third or fourth contract."

"They're pros, Hiccup."

"And you're a world champion," he's the first person to sound genuinely sure of her in weeks and she can't decide whether it adds to the pressure or hefts a load off of her shoulders. "Just—I'll use my dad's letterhead, make it look all congressional."

"I don't want you—" she pauses, looking up at him and catching a heartbreaking glint of hope in his eyes. This is how it goes with Hiccup. He gets an idea into his brain, and whether it's mowing the lawn that day, rain or no rain, or building something seemingly impossible, it's going to happen and fighting it is pushing a rock uphill. In the mud. "You know what? Go ahead."

"Really?" He raises his eyebrows, stiffening beside her a bit as the idea takes hold in his brain, churning near visible cogs behind his eyes. "Because I thought that I was going to yank that from your cold, dead hands."

"Maybe if I start letting you help, you'll stop butting your head in," she tries to sound fierce, but it doesn't really work, catching on something wet and oddly grateful in her throat. "Strengths and weaknesses, right? I should let you step in where you're talented."

"Damn."

"What?" She glares at him over her shoulder, "I thought you were

asking to help here."

"No, I just had a bet going that it'd take you six years to realize that. It only took you four, I owe a guyâ€"ouch." Her knuckles connect with the side of his thigh and he flinches melodramatically.

"You know what I realized the other day, while we were fighting?"

"Hmm?" He asks, delicately plucking her wrist away from his leg as if disengaging a mine.

"No matter how much of an idiot you are, I'm never going to break up with you." It's oddly freeing to say it to his face and she twists as much as her elevated knee allows in order to see his expression clearly. "I'm in this for life at this point."

Hiccup grins.

"Oh, really?"

"Yup," and it's not as nerve wracking as it really should be, expressing her intentions to buckle down. "I'm going to be with you forever. And your dad is under the impression that you're equally committed."

"You asked my dad?" He laughs, more than a little taken aback as his posture springs rigid.

"I wish I hadn't," she laughs, looking at the outline of her feet, height mismatched under the blankets. "He wondered if I was asking for your hand in marriage."

"Erâ€"were you?" Hiccup clarifies, fingers oddly light against her arm.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I'm 22," Astrid scowls over her shoulder.

"Right, so 'for life' doesn't include marriage," he laughs, wondering why this is funny and amazingly glad that he doesn't feel brushed off like he so easily could.

"I didn't say that," and her back is soft against his side, pressing into him a little too firmly, like it's cold and she's shyly stealing his warmth. "Just let's not get ahead of ourselves, alright?"

"Not a chance. I'm already planning our wedding. You like daffodils, right?" His hands drop to her sides and tickle gently, teasing the sensitive skin of her ribs. She squirms away, wincing as it jerks her swollen knee and his hands press solidly against her sides. "Sorry."

"It's ok," she laughs, only vaguely mistrustful as she settles back against him, biting her lip and exhaling around white teeth. "And no daffodils. They make me sneeze."

"Don't worry," his arm coils further around her waist, warm and lithe and comforting. "I just want to make clear that when the time

comes, _I _ will be doing the asking."

"Fine. If you must," she nudges him almost sharply with her elbow.
"But seriously. Give it a bit."

"I promise I won't pounce anytime soon."

"Good," but she's smiling a little too wide as her head finds that mysteriously comfortable nook in the front of Hiccup's shoulder.

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****Reconciliation. Sweet sweet reconciliation. ****

****I'll respond to last chapter's reviews in a bit, and don't forget to leave one here. Because so much happened. ****

****Also, go read Winter in Lif's Holt. It's the sequel to Becoming Lifbrasir, it's all out at once, and it's amazing. ****

20. Chapter 20

****Ok, so these are going up fast now, but don't forget to review. We're getting to the really good part, and I really want to know what you guys think. ****

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The only thing more shocking than a nearly immediate reply from the Nike advertising representative was their urgency to meet the next day. Then again, Hiccup knew this entire time that Astrid was selling herself short and they were probably more interest than she'd initially let on.

Maybe it's his perspective from outside of that athletically inclined sphere, but Astrid isâ€|different. He's always seen it. The determination in her face, composure in her jaw.

She's a damned born spokesperson.

Hiccup feels a little out of place in the marble office, but he attributes most of that to the unreasonably loud click of his left foot against the floor, echoing off of the walls like there are more than one of him. The bench outside of Mr. Ryan's door is too comfortable, like it's trying to lull him into complacency, and he holds the revised contract tighter in steady fingers, grinding his metal foot against the leg of the bench to break up the heavy silence.

Astrid eventually approved of the edits, after a long, hand-holding argument that led to uncomfortably sleeping in her bed while trying not to displace two doting dogs and a stack of necessary pillows. He doesn't really think it's enough, she's newly determined to race in September and she advised him not to do anything about the ludicrous insistence that she only wear those strange looking shoes to train.

But she won't owe them anything if she doesn't win, and that's a

decent start.

It is five minutes past Hiccup's designated appointment time when the door opens and a distinct ex-jock of a man holds open the door, looking lost into the hallway for a second before recognizing something familiar in Hiccup's face and grinning.

"Henry Haddock?"

"Yes," Hiccup thwarts the stutter that flirts with the tip of his tongue and stands, stepping forward with his quiet right foot and shaking the man's hand. "Thanks for meeting on such short notice."

"I didn't realize that Astrid Hofferson had the congressman's team on her side." Hiccup lets himself smile amicably at that, assuming the position and hoping he's half as good at acting like a lawyer as he needs to be.

"Well, she's part of the family." This particular smile isn't faked at all and he squares his shoulders, following the man into his office and sitting into one of the also too comfortable chairs on the plush white carpet. He can almost see the man sitting across from him with an arm slung around his father in a college football photo, and it keeps him on edge and feeling chronically out of place.

"So, I take it that she gave that contract a good review," Mr. Ryan leans forward, a bit more serious.

"She did," he places the edited stack of paper on the table between them, fingering the sticky notes poking out from the sides of the important pages. They're all towards the back of the stack, and it seems increasingly like they're trying to prey on an excited, hurt girl who wouldn't waste time reading past all the glowing possibilities to the fine print. "And umm—the Haddock team has a few edits that we'd like to encourage."

He wishes he'd let his dad come, for the first time today. Gerard had offered, apparently his break between meetings coincided with Hiccup's appointment, but it had seemed like a betrayal of Astrid's trust. It's really a leap between them, for her to be letting him figure this so important puzzle without her constant input, and the last thing he wants to do is muck it up by inviting the world in.

Or at least that's how Astrid would think of it.

"I'm assuming that you have those written down here?" Hiccup nods and slides the contract across the desk towards the man.

"Yes, they're written out on applicable pages," he points towards the sticky notes poking from the trim edge of the contract and Mr. Ryan flips to the first note, reading Astrid's neat handwriting with pursed lips. He'd tried to write out everything, but could only take her biting her fingernails over his scrawl for so long. "Personally, I would have changed more, but she's confident."

"So—you're taking issue with this insurance on our part," he points to that passage that would tie Astrid into something dangerous if her knee gives out.

"That makes this dangerous for Astrid," Hiccup leans forward onto his elbows, letting his eyebrows furrow. "There is no guarantee in that knee."

It's easier to say without her here, looking to him for silent support that she doesn't think she should need.

"And that means there's no guarantee in our spokesperson, Henry" "can I call you Henry?"

"Mr. Haddock," he snips, exhaling before trying again, this time unable to keep the surging irritation completely under wraps. "I want a guarantee that Astrid is unharmed financially, regardless of whether she wins in September."

"That's quite a demand," Mr. Ryan comments, not quite so cheery anymore as he sits up straighter, closing the contract and smoothing the cover page with hands that demonstrate more care for the crisp paper than whoever might be signing it. "Astrid realizes what an opportunity this is, doesn't she?"

"She does. Just as the _Haddock_ operating in the name of her physical best interests, I found it necessary to insist on this meeting," he feels dirty dropping the name "but a dirty sort of powerful."

It's interesting that he'd never drop it in high school, never use it to make someone notice him, but if it's Astrid on the line, it's suddenly _Haddock_ this and _Haddock_ that.

"Unfortunately, it's difficult to give an opportunity like this to a _retired_ athlete" "

"So you don't actually think she's going to recover in time."

The silence stretches and Hiccup wonders how to plow forward.

Everything within him wants to take the opportunity to stand and storm out of the room. But he feels obliged to at least try and convince the man that there's no better role model, no better spokesperson for recovery and rebirth than Astrid. He wants to toss an x-ray of his long healed break onto the table and talk about the gentle determination that violence left behind.

He has a million anecdotes about rescued pitbulls and helping scared freshmen get through their first college race.

Mr. Ryan doesn't deserve any of those stories.

"Astrid's doctors have expressed to me that September is absolutely achievable."

"You're not going to find anyone like Astrid," Hiccup nods resolutely, hands clamping down on the edge of the table as he stands, pushing his chair back with the pits of his knees. "And I'd love it if you sent over a revised and approved copy of that contract, which she will definitely sign. Thank you for your time."

He narrowly avoids tripping as he sidles backwards around the chair, left foot clanging against the aluminum base with a distinctly metallic chime. Mr. Ryan's eyes dart down and fixate on the prosthetic, and Hiccup can't tell whether he's embarrassed to be found out or proud that somehow the foot remained a secret for this long.

"I hadn't noticed your leg," the man looks away, appropriately sheepish in a way that makes awkward heat rise in the back of Hiccup's neck. He's always hated people mincing around the injury, it's better when Ruff shouts stump the way that people used to tease him for freckles.

It's an adjective, not a disability.

"It's not something to notice," Hiccup shrugs, and Mr. Ryan doesn't react well to the stubborn set of his jaw. The man thinks for a minute, taking in the skepticism, the mature and straight-backed doubt. Hiccup is proud to be walking on an injury like it isn't there, and he lets that through, staring confidently at the man in front of him. He feels like Astrid, pretending not to limp the week before and Mr. Ryan falters, pushing the contract away towards the wall, crisp cover page wrinkling with the force.

"So Astrid is a family friend?"

"Of my father, yes," Hiccup starts, and it immediately sounds fake. "And my girlfriend for the last four years."

It's rare times like these that he wishes they were already engaged, or something. Girlfriend sounds so impermanent, barely covering the bond, and more currently important, the loyalty that's compelling him to keep her absolutely safe.

He resists the urge to smile when he remembers Astrid pressed up against him, warning him not to hurry on a proposal.

"Did sheâ€¦know you when you lost the leg?"

Hiccup narrows his eyes, taking in the put together man in front of him.

What did he think he was seeing when he first met Astrid? Did he wonder how a lifetime athlete on the physical rocks found her startling level of composure? Did he think it was strange that Astrid didn't jump desperately on the opportunity like a lot of people in her position would have? Did he think she was a hassle because she stopped and thought?

Now somethingâ€¦beautiful is brewing in the man's eyes. Like Hiccup's grandparents when they met Astrid for the first time, and she was pretty and polite.

Hiccup sees plans, flying off into the future without their consent, taking on lives of their own. .

He opts to quench the conversation.

"I don't see how that's your business." Hiccup wonders what Astrid would say, and follows that lead, trying to shut the man out

absolutely and finally.

"I have a new proposition," Mr. Ryan pulls a pad of paper in front of him and sketches a stick figure of a tall lean man with one straight peg for a foot standing next to a shorter stick figure with more hair and a knee brace that's obviously supposed to be Astrid. "You twoâ€¦you know a lot about recovery, and I'm thinking we'd be more than interested in you appearing in the advertising campaign together."

Hiccup jerks and stands up straight, frowning and stepping further away from the desk.

"My knees are fine."

"That's great," he grins, back to the sunny salesman that Hiccup met originally.

"And I thought you were looking for someone to advertise recovery shoesâ€¦not exactly expecting to recover any time soon," Hiccup deadpans.

"So you wouldn't even consider it?" Mr. Ryan asks, "because this path would make Astrid racing in September unnecessary."

Hiccup pauses and looks at the man more carefully.

"I want an edit in Astrid's contract that offers her something even if she ends up injured. You're encouraging her to train too soon by signing it." He plays his newfound advantage, testing the waters with a more assertive tone than he'd usually employ.

"But if we were to develop a scheme that would involve you in the advertising processâ€¦"

"I assume we'd look at it in a meeting where Astrid delivers that edited contract. Signed."

The two men stare at each other, Hiccup oddly comfortable as the ice to Mr. Ryan's insistent warmth.

"How does next Wednesday sound?" Mr. Ryan asks after a long, long pause and Hiccup grins beneath tightly closed lips.

"I'll expect that contract by the end of the week then, we'll want to revise it further."

"The end of the week," Hiccup extends his hand to meet the other man's, shaking it soundly. "It was a pleasure meeting with you Mr. Haddock."

"Likewise," and despite his high-heel clacking on the hard hallway floor, Hiccup feels oddly victorious as he evacuates the building.

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Waiting for Hiccup to come home is awful, only barely improved by Spike and Toothless curled around her, acting like pillows and blankets in a big canine mess of paws and fur. Her head jerks up in

unison with theirs when the door shuts and she struggles against the tangled comforter to sit up straight, adjusting her twisted shirt and fidgeting as he walks down the hallway with a lopsided gait that just sounds exhausted.

It's not encouraging.

Astrid is almost ashamed that the first thing she notices when Hiccup slumps into her bedroom doorway is how good he looks in a suit. He stands under the doorjamb, loosening his tie and petting the dogs who are now wagging around his feet with practiced fingers that make them squirm delighted. Even with his admittedly slumped shoulders, he's smiling when he looks up at her, a little hesitant but unmistakably proud.

"Soâ€¦" She sits up straight in the bed, holding her breath impatiently. "How'd it go?"

"It wentâ€¦" he pauses for an agonizingly long moment, unbuttoning that top, most restrictive button his dress shirt and watching nerves pool in Astrid's pinched expression. "We've got to go in for a meeting next Wednesday, but I should have a revised contract in hand within the next couple of days." His face splits into a disarmingly smug gap-toothed grin and Astrid swings stiff legs over the side of the bed, hopping almost gracefully up to him and throwing tightly clamped arms around his neck. "Air?" He coughs, hands wrapping around her waist and clasping against her lower back.

"Sorry," she releases her iron grip, hopping slightly on her good foot to adjust wavering balance while her bad foot hangs tentatively behind her, six inches off the ground. "So, what happened? Tell me about it, I wish I would have gone-urf." She grunts as Hiccup lifts her with tight hands around her waist, setting her on the edge of the bed before sitting beside her.

"Slow down," he laughs, scratching Spike's head as the dog jumps up to lay beside him, chin on his knee. "And there is a small problem that we're going to have to get around."

"Oh?" Her voice drops, tone critical as she leans away from him slightly, giving Toothless enough clearance to butt his large, triangular head between them.

"Not...it's not anything we can't talk our way out of," he insists, hands gesturing to the wall in front of him, already halfway into some lofty plan.

"That's not comforting."

"They want me to be in this...campaign with you," he blurts, flushing embarrassed. "It's not like it was my idea or anything, but the guy noticed my foot-and I don't know why it took him so long. The floor was so loud in there that I sounded like half a woman in stripper heels," Astrid sputters a laugh at that and Hiccup manages a brief smile before continuing. "And he started asking me about you, and I said you were my girlfriend, so he started asking me about us, and if you were there for the legâ€¦"

"And?"

"And he got all excited and started drawing things, and it was you and me in a commercial," he starts, ducking his head as all of his earlier machismo leaks out and leaves behind the keen desire to babble. "And it's some spiel about love and recovery and you're going to think it's nauseating-"

Hiccup flushes and it's every time he brought her flowers that she didn't quite know what to do with.

"They want us to do some campaign together based on our story and recovery and shoes?"

"Yeah. Absolutely ridiculous, I know, but I got that other contract, so we just have to dodge this offer and we're good. And remember, if you don't like this contract either, or you change your mind, it's absolutely fine if you don't sign-"

"You don't want to do it?" Astrid is almost surprised by her hurt and hopeful tone.

There's something oddly appealing about doing this with Hiccup. She doesn't quite feel ready to play the part of jilted and determined athlete, terminally afraid that she's melted into something softer and different through the course of this injury. How would Astrid Hofferson even approach the problem? Because that's who Nike wanted. They wanted the winner, the cut throat climber who'd do anything to get back on top.

But being the girl who loves Hiccup, and all of his one-footed charm already feels far more natural. It's sort of...sweet, in a strange way to have some greater third party point out that she and Hiccup are special and important as an item. Even before her knee, but admittedly more so after.

"No, I'm not too keen on you signing anything with them," he shrugs, thinking that he'd already been clear. "I'll help you get student loans...I just-"

"You won't do love shoes with me?"

"Love shoes?" Hiccup asks with a snort and Spike sighs against his leg, hopping down as he proves an obviously unsatisfactory pillow. Toothless follows the pit out into the hallway, and both dogs groan as they crumple into a pile against the opposite wall.

"Yeah," she blushes and pushes her bangs behind her ear with a hurried hand. "They want us to do a commercial for shoes and sell them using our...relationship. So love shoes."

"Do you want to do it?" Hiccup is torn between embarrassment and a strange bloom of flattery in his chest.

"Well, not if you don't want to," she shrinks back into that less emotive cage, shrugging. "And you obviously don't."

"But if I wanted to?" He asks and she turns too quickly to face him and he grins. "You want to!"

"No, it's stupid." She shrugs, crossing her arms and staring at the wall in front of them, trying not to blush. "I mean, how many of

those dumb cancer commercials do you see where there's some high school kid who goes to prom with the love of his life or something before he dies. It's old hat. I don't want to be a..._clickÃ©_."

"Right, and that's why you're blushing-ouch," he flinches as she elbows him in the side. "And it is sort of...romantic."

"Eww," she insists, forceful crimson rising to her cheeks. "I hate that stuff ."

"But you want to do love shoes."

"No," she scowls. "And so what if I did? Is that really so horrible if I want to do something-"

"Romantic?"

"Sappy," she corrects him. "I'll just sign the contract you argued for. That'll be good."

"And again, you don't _have_ to sign it," he reminds her seriously and she rolls her eyes.

"You went through getting it fixed, and I was going to sign it anyway. It's a fantastic deal," she tries to convince herself, stuck on the fact that goofing off with Hiccup and filming some romantic clip sounds worlds better.

And it shouldn't. She should be warped by the same feeling that compels her to stand lonely and victorious on the top of a podium. She should want to do this by herself, for herself.

But there's something oddly appealing about doing this with Hiccup.

There's something wistful and foreign in Astrid's expression and Hiccup narrows his eyes, deciding to prod the issue and see where that face leads. Plus, he's still a fan of the fact that with the alternate scheme, Astrid won't have to race in September. And as the admittedly romantic half of this pairing, he's obligated to at least consider _love shoes_, right ?

"Well, think about it. But you honestly couldn't convince me to do this whole _love shoes_ scheme if you tried." She turns to face him in slow motion, cocking her head as that competitive flint sparks behind curious blue eyes. "What? It's ridiculous. No one would ever believe you could be that sappy."

"I can be sappy," she refutes, glowering at him. "I can be sappy and romantic and clichÃ© all at once."

"I don't believe you," he laughs, taking in all of that atypical fire lighting her downright malicious expression. "And I just don't think you could play sappy girl in love, even with all the advertising magic."

Maybe that's just something he wants to see.

That's not bad, is it?

"What do you mean, babe ?" the always potent pet name sounds strange and sort of wonderful on her unusually sweet tongue, and warm arms wrap around him as she presses sweetly into his side. He turns his head to chide her that it's a good effort, prod the obviously struck flame and hope for further fireworks, but is instantly caught in the suddenly slung web of her cleavage.

"Ermâ€|" he blinks slowly, trying to remember if she was wearing that shirt earlier and determining that she must have just yanked it down before laying on her charm. The cups of her bra peek barely above the v-neck as she pushes those still infectious new assets against his side. "What?"

"I asked what you meant?" She laughs a little too hard, and he almost asks what's so funny before he notices the jiggling in her chest that the sound is causing. He swallows hard. "Because I bet that I can play romantic fine," a bit of that defiance peeks through her otherwise open expression as a tender hand wraps around the back of his neck and yanks him too hard, closer to her level. "And I bet I can convince you to do this with me."

She doesn't give him time to respond to her challenge, kissing him gently and letting her fingers play with the fine hairs tickling the nape of his neck. Her soft, searching lips are a delightful contrast to the glare he endured a minute ago and Hiccup leans into her, hand finding her bare thigh between soft cotton shorts and her ace bandage. She laughs against his mouth, free hand starting to yank his shirttails out of his belt.

It's not exactly clear when jokingly convincing him to do this became infallibly intertwined with getting him naked, but it's beyond obvious that he's wearing entirely too many clothes. Her hands climb his chest, sliding under the shoulders of his blazer and shoving it down his arms. He tosses it to the floor, to somewhere he hopes is outside of the zone of destruction, and Astrid slings her still nimble left leg over his lap, nipping at the side of his neck and unbuttoning his shirt.

"If this is you being romanticâ€|" he groans as she sucks his earlobe into her mouth and bites it gently, "this would never work."

"Why not?" she grinds forward against the increasingly interested bulge in his pants. That unnervingly sweet tone from a moment ago has phased to something husky and familiar and Hiccup starts working the back of her shirt up. Her frustrated fingernails claw at his white undershirt as she yanks his shirt the rest of the way out of his pants and pushes the still crisp cotton off of his shoulders. "Why are you wearing so many goddamn layers?"

"I could say the same for you," he tugs insistently at her shirt and she raises her arms over her head to allow him to pull it off and throw it in vaguely the same direction as his blazer. "And if this is your version of romance," he kisses downwards from her collarbone, burying his face in her cleavage, all warm breath and sweetness, and sliding his fingers around her ribcage to unclasp the too tight bra. "You're going to have a real problem keeping it G-rated."

"I don't need to worry about that," she scoffs, yanking him back to her mouth with a handful of hair, kissing him soundly and groaning

against his lips as his hands dodge the waistband of her shorts and squeeze her rear. "I've got you doing that adoring stare you're so good at," she laughs, raking fingernails up his back and taking his plain white undershirt with her.

"You're playing a dangerous game," his hands regretfully slide out from under her shorts as he finagles out of his shirt and casts it carelessly aside. "Telling me I have to do all the work for this as a way of convincing me to do it."

"I'm not making you do all the work _at all_," she nearly purrs, standing and stepping out of her shorts with a stiff wince and a too pronounced bobble. Hiccup's hands don't quite have time to hold her upright and steady before she's yanking his belt from its loops and unbuttoning his pants with quick fingers. "Not at all."

As soon as his pants are on the ground he catches her waist with a long arm and tugs her to lie back on the bed, looming over her in too tight boxers.

"Again, your definition of romantic is really, really aggressive." His hand slides across the curve of her waist and grasps at her hip, calluses electric against the rise of bone. He nips at her bottom lip, pushing her bangs away from her face with tender fingers. Astrid can't help but focus on the warmth of his hips pressing into hers, heavy and sure like they're clicking into place.

"You don't seem like you're complaining," she grinds her hips up into him, raising her eyebrows and waiting for a rebuttal.

"I'm just saying," he shrugs, sliding to the side and stroking feather light fingers up her stomach to circle her navel, "I don't want my athletic wear modeling career slandered by your bad acting."

"Fine then Mr. Romance," she lets her fingers trail slowly down the notches of his spine, kissing tenderly across the newly shaven line of his jaw. "Go shut the door, and you can eat your words at the sheer romance that's about to happen here."

"Yeah?" He asks, lingering over her a moment too long before sliding off of the bed and shutting the door with an anticipatory click. "I'm looking forward to seeing that. I should get a camera."

"Oh, come here," she sits up, patting the bed and looking him up and down a little too appraisingly. "But first take off your underwear." She swallows hard as he listens, stepping out of his boxers with a stiff legged hobble. After far too long of a pause, he sits beside her and she bends across his lap, breasts distractedly warm against his thigh as she unbuttons his leg, letting it fall to the ground. "There we go, _fully_ naked."

"I'm feeling the _bossy_," he rolls his eyes and slides a hand up her thigh, taking his sweet time while she glares at his lone sock. "Not so much the romance," he scoffs, tugging off that last item of clothing and dropping it somewhere on the floor. Astrid slides her leg around behind his hips, carefully repositioning herself behind him and resting warm hands on his shoulders. He looks at her quizzically over his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she shrugs, digging her thumbs into those perpetually stressed out knots at the base of his neck. He groans and slumps forward, chin hanging towards his chest as her fingers move down along his spine, smoothing knots along the way. "And all the sass shuts downâ€¦"

"Mmm?" He hums and she laughs quietly, leaning forward to kiss a particularly dense patch of freckles on his shoulder.

"Thanks for going and doing that today," her hand slide around to his front, stroking at the ruddy trail of hair sloping down his stomach. He jolts as she presses herself fully to his back, lips scalding against the nape of his neck. "It means a lot."

"Thanks for letting mä"ee!" He squeaks and clears his throat as one so warm hand slides down to grasp his shaft and pump slowly, while her other hand joins to roll his balls between gentle fingers.

"I'm glad you did," she nuzzles his back, licking a thin line up the peak of his spine with the tip of her tongue and puffing cool air across the spot. Goosebumps prickle against her cheek and she smooths her thumb over the head of him before gripping more firmly and sliding back down to the thatch of hair at his base. 'It's probably best that they still don't see me limp."

Her thighs grip his hips like a vice as her fingers pump three times in quick, fluid succession, sending a shiver up his spine.

"For a minute there, you almost had romantic too," he whines, lamenting all of those massage loosened knots that are now solidifying in the wake of her teasing.

"It's still a massage," she squeezes him gently, peppering kisses along the crest of his shoulders and squeezing his sack in an almost too warm palm.

"Astridä" he groans, his head falling back against the top of hers.

"Do this with me."

"Do what with you?" He sounds hopeful enough to make her laugh and pump her fingers a bit faster around him.

"Do this commercial with me. Please." She kisses the place where his neck blends into his shoulder, eyelashes fluttering against the blush travelling down his neck. "It'll beä" Fun sounds wrong. Fun sounds like an afternoon or a joke. "It'll be nice. I won't have to run in September. I'll have time." She trails her hand from his balls up his stomach to trace faint lines across his chest that immediately turn red in her wake. "Come on."

"This is coercion." His voice is too deep, breathy in the pit of his throat and feeding the bonfire burning in the pit of her stomach.

"Please."

"Astridä" "

"Please?" She tries one last time, vowing to give up and ravish him after this attempt. She can run in Septemberâ€|but there's still something tempting andâ€|warm about doing this with Hiccup.

"Alâ€|alright," he gives in, head flopping back onto her shoulder with a painful thud. "I'll do it. I don't know why you want me to, but I'll do it."

"Are you just saying that because I'm teasing you?" She pulls her hands back to rest on his shoulders, gripping them as a reality check.

"No," he sighs, sitting back straight and looking over his shoulder. "You actually want to do this, and I really like the idea of you not training before you're ready."

"Thank you," Astrid grins, scooting a few inches towards the center of the mattress and raising her eyebrows at him. "Soâ€|mph!" Her words are cut off with a stutter and warm, chapped lips pressing against hers. Hiccup grabs her hips and shoves her further onto the bed, bracing careful knees between her legs and leaning down over her, hips pressing against hers. She wraps her arms around his neck and lies back fully, dragging him with her and wrapping one good leg around his back.

"I should have said yes earlierâ€|" he teases, letting his head loll sideways as she kisses up the side of his neck, holding him impossibly close with the heel digging into his lower back.

"Yeah, you made me wait long enough." His hand slides down the curve of her waist and bumps against the top of her ace bandage. He pulls far enough away from her mouth to look down at her worried.

"Condom?" He half asks, loathe to leave his current position on top of her. It's not romantic, he misses feeling her close and tight and hot around him.

"Yeah," she nods, frowning, and the moment of commiseration dulls the tip of his arousal. He wants to propose he'll pull out, he wants an alternate option that won't _separate_ him from her.

"Alright," he climbs off of her, cold and awkward, balancing on one foot just long enough to retrieve his pants and pull his wallet out of the pocket.

"Seriously, when did you start hiding them everywhere?" She laughs, bringing some effervescence back to the atmosphere.

"When I was nineteen?" He chuckles, sitting on the edge of the bed and tearing open the package. "I wasn't going to miss out on anything due to lack of condom. Always prepared and all that."

"You weren't a boy scout," she nearly giggles, opening her arms and letting him back on top of her, that lithe good leg clenching around his lower back. It doesn't seem as funny when he's looking at her like something savory.

"It's still a good motto."

"You on top then?" She suggests, almost sheepish as she spreads her legs to get that knee further out of the way, as far out to the side as she can manage.

"I never appreciated all the work you do," he jokes, groaning and resting his forehead against her shoulder in mime exhaustion.

"Come on, I thought you were enjoying taking control of the situation," she rubs a soothing hand over his shoulders, trying to convey the apology that feels wrong.

She's sorry that she can't help more, and it's somehow worse than not being able to walk. This stupid knee is invading every aspect of them and keeping them in this strange alternate universe where she's weak and he negotiates for her.

"I am," he laughs, kissing her shoulder and leaning to one elbow, sliding a hand down her stomach to dip careful fingers between her legs. He raises his eyebrows and grins. "You're enjoying it too."

"Are you going to do anything about that?" She flushes and wraps her arms more tightly around his neck, nudging her hips up into his.

"You're really enjoying it thenâ€¦" he laughs, kissing her again with that strangely attractive confidence as one of her hands slides between them, groaning when she grips his shaft and positions it with shaking fingers.

"Are you doneâ€¦" he slides into place with a smooth lunge of his hips and her breath catches in her throat, "talking?"

"You're the chatty Cathy," he readjusts his hips against her, entirely flush with every nook and cranny before pulling back in a long, slow stroke and sliding back in.

"Shut up." She buries her face in his shoulder, closing her eyes and focusing on the slow, delicious drag inside of her.

For once, he listens.

Her leg tightens around his back as he speeds up slightly, snapping his hips into her and groaning into her ear. Something about the way she's holding her bad leg out of the way makes everything tighter, the angle slightly different and irresistibly slick. She grips at the clenching muscles of his upper back, moaning in a way that encourages him to thrust deeper.

"Astrid," he groans, kissing the shell of her ear and grabbing her good hip with a careful palm, tugging her against his thrusts.

"Harder?" She asks, fingernails digging into the skin of his back almost enough to hurt.

"Knee," he reminds her, wishing she were wearing the brace so he could justify pounding into her the way that he wants to. He wants to grab her waist, tug her against him again and again and againâ€¦

He groans as everything kicks up a notch and his thrusts start to become hectically uneven. It's been too long and she's so so tight, he can just imagine what she feels like without the barrier, slick and hot and welcoming.

"Knee is fine," she moans, dragging her fingernails down his back and gripping at his ass, "just go. Please."

She hasn't felt the joint twinge since they started, but that could as easily be attributed to the general warm, urgent static spreading through her entire nervous system. Every forward thrust of his hips grinds his pubic bone against her clit and it's almost enough, almost sending her over that lingering cliff.

"Ok," he gasps after a moment, thrusting hard against her and gripping her hip impossibly tightly, pulling her back into him and driving forward with renewed rhythm even as his toes tingle and leave ahead of him.

"Hiccup," the low groan is a lightning bolt through his body and he bites his lip, struggling to maintain rhythm as her head falls back against the bed, eyes squinted shut. He can see her pulse through the thin skin on the side of her neck, fluttering like a caged bird and he kisses the spot, sucking salty skin into his mouth and biting gently. "Oh!" She stiffens underneath him, fingernails threatening to draw blood as her leg tightens around him, pulling him flush inside of her, tight muscles twitching around his length.

He follows, hand clamping down on her hip as his head falls to her shoulder, pulsing inside of her as her arms go slack and fall to the bed beside them. Her heel follows with a quiet thunk, bouncing against the mattress before sliding to lie parallel to his.

"I really should have said yes earlier," he groans, sliding off of her and flopping onto the bed, flinching at a surprising draft on his damp crotch.

"I love you," she reaches down between them and grabs his hand, intertwining their fingers. "And thank you, seriously."

"I was, uh, hoping you'd talk me into it a little more." He grins and she doesn't quite succeed in rolling her eyes before her hand is again travelling that well known path down his chest.

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**So we have badass Hiccup, playing hardball. We have LOVE SHOES, and I can't be the only one still cackling over that. Love Shoes. It's the goofiest joke that's ever made the final cut, and I have to thank Midoriko-sama for the absurdity. **

**And then we have Astrid wanting to be romantic, and a lemon, which I hope is good. Those are always nerve wracking, no matter how many I post. **

**Thanks and please tell me what you think! **

**Ok, guys. Be excited. I like this chapter too much. But it is a long one. **

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Astrid stands carefully on two even feet, stretching her right knee blissfully straight and leaning her hips forward against the marble counter top. She can't remember the last time that she made pancakes from a recipe, because she's normally moving too fast and her stomach is growling too loud to stop and measure, but something about this feelsâ€|deserving of perfection. She smiles, a bit giddy, and crosses the kitchen on those two semi-capable feet.

Walking is blissful.

It was arguably in the top ten best moments of her life when she rolled out of bed this morning and stood, stiff but absolutely ignoring her crutches.

Walking isâ€|enough for now.

After last night, and all of its likely leg stretching benefits, she thinks that she has a decent chance talking Hiccup into this ridiculous ad campaign. She wouldn't have to rush back into shape. She could take her time and somehow still magically have that money and all of the ties to her future.

Hiccup is doing the absolute opposite of holding her back, and she's trying to figure out a way to say it without being naked.

Not that being naked wasn't nice. Being naked was very nice.

She plans to be naked again now that she can stand properly. For hours.

After dumping a quarter cup of oil into the still thick batter, she stirs the last ingredient into the paste with a rubber spatula, smiling to herself at the slightly lumpy consistency. It's perfect for pancakes, even with those seeming imperfections, and if she were to spend any more time whipping it into shape it would end up tough and chewy and there would be no fixing it.

She'll run again. She knows she will just like there's some primal place inside of her that knows the sun will rise tomorrow. But it's oddly freeing to be out from under that ticking clock thumb, to relish in the current almost stability underneath her.

No, it doesn't feel right. She feels strange and too dense, floating above a joint that remains unsure whether it will continue to act like one, but there's a sort of promise to the position, like the bad first test grades that Hiccup forced her to eventually see as room for improvement. This will get better. She will build it back until she can't tell that it was ever hurt.

The pancake batter sizzles when it hits the pan and she hums to herself, dropping chocolate chips into the still gooey side and watching them spread and melt against the creamy base. Toothless's wet nose bumps against her thigh, discernible from Spike's only by its height, and she looks down into bright eyes, patting the top of

his head with an open palm.

"Good morning," she greets, popping a chocolate chip into her mouth and frowning slightly at his envious stare. "No chocolate for you. I like you too much." By the time he's momentarily satisfied with her rubbing of his ears, the pancakes are bubbling in the center and Astrid flips them, drooling a bit at the sweet smell of chocolate searing against the hot pan. "So, not sleeping in with Hiccup this morning, eh?"

She's as crazy as her boyfriend, chatting with a dog.

Toothless sits at her feet, chin on the side of her hip as he thumps a long bushy tail against the floor, staring at the half full bowl of batter expectantly. Astrid sighs and scoops some onto her finger, holding it out for the wolf to lovingly lick off.

"Don't tell Hiccup, alright? You're supposed to be on a diet," she scoffs and eats a handful of the chocolate, carefully checking the edge of a pancake with her spatula and flipping them out onto a plate on the counter. "Then again, I'm supposed to be on a diet too." The wolf wags again, drooling a single gooey rivulet down his chin as she pours the final batch of batter into the pan and sprinkles with chocolate chips, taking another few for herself. After a moment of silent deliberation, she sets the bowl on the floor and smiles as Toothless tucks in, cleaning it with a vigorous tongue. "Now you can't tell Spike either. I always let her lick the bowl, but I guess she chose to sleep in this morning. Not that I can blame her, Hiccup's bed is the most comfortable," she nudges the bowl closer to Toothless with a blissfully functional foot when he jars from his easy reach. "Tonight, right? I get to sleep there tonight" and don't even start with me. Your bed on the floor is plenty comfortable, and you always sneak back up by morning."

His look is anything but understanding and he looks at the bowl like it's absolutely unacceptable that it hasn't refilled itself. She picks it up off of the ground with an eye roll that the dog surely understands and sets it in the sink.

"Spoiled. I keep telling Hiccup that you're crazy spoiled," Astrid nudges him away from the handle of her spatula with a refreshingly fluid right hip. "And you're a menace. Yeah, really, a menace. Don't look at me like that," she shakes her head, reaching out and flipping the pancakes for a final cook, shoving past Toothless as gently as she can to pull the butter out of the fridge and smear a streak across the still warm pancakes on the plate. "You take up half the kitchen with those paws," she nudges at his lone set of front toes and grins at his dopey look that almost nears embarrassment. "I like your huge paws. They just manage to take up a lot of floor, alright?" After stacking the remaining pancakes onto the plates and turning off the stove, she tucks the syrup under an armpit and looks levelly down at the wolf. "You're going to let me carry this, and not trip me all the way down the hallway, ok? Ok, you got me."

Toothless left Hiccup's door wide open and Astrid traipses inside, steps even but slow, before pausing by the foot of his bed. Spike is curled up, boxy head on his shoulder in Astrid's favorite spot to rest her own, eyes squinting and twitching in the midst of some mysterious doggy dream. Hiccup is somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, an idle sloppy hand patting Spike's grey haunch in an

uneven rhythm.

Toothless shatters the calm with a leaping bound onto the bed, punching Hiccup in the ribs and scaring Spike awake with an ear shattering yelp. Hiccup groans and hugs the wolf's head to his throbbing stomach, coughing into the thick fur at the back of his neck.

"Bud. Bud, down. Come on," he pats the dog on the side of his ribs, patting the bed beside his shortened leg and letting out a final deep wheeze when the wolf flops down. He squints eyes shut and lays back against his pillow, sighing happily to himself as Spike curls back up against his side, tail thumping while she stares at Astrid.

"Good morning," she greets after a moment and Hiccup props himself back up onto sleepy elbows, grinning at the plates in her hands.

"Oh, crap, good morning," he sits up fully and gives Toothless a stern silent look until the wolf jumps down onto the floor. Spike leaves the bed willingly, wagging around Astrid's feet and licking at her bare calves. "You made breakfast?"

"I was craving some pancakes, and I can walk today," she shrugs and it's wonderful to not feel the need to act nonchalant.

"Toothless, down," Hiccup orders, pointing at the floor and engaging in a nearly futile staring contest with the wolf. After a defiant fifteen seconds, he slinks to the floor and offers a half-hearted apology to a still moping Spike before the two dogs curl up at opposite ends of their padded bed on the floor. "Sit," he directs this command at Astrid, patting the bed beside him and she steps close with a fond roll of her eyes.

She's not a dog, but it doesn't feel like the time to bring it up.

They juggle the plates and bottle of syrup as Astrid climbs into bed beside him in front of her normal pillow, stiff leg stretched out in front of them.

"When do you have class today?" She asks, gently nudging his shoulder with hers and checking the clock. Eight thirty doesn't seem early to her, but it might as well still be dark out considering Hiccup's usual schedule.

"Not until eleven," he shrugs, smiling at the clock. "And for once, I'm not in a hurry, so thank you." He frowns and rubs at the probably bruising Toothless punch on his stomach. "But that was quite the wake up."

"I had something gentler planned," Astrid laughs, using the syrup and setting the bottle aside on his bedside table.

"Next time make him promise not to do that."

"He'd already promised not to trip me down the hallway," she grins, "I opted not to push my luck."

"Good point, but I don't think my pancreas is ever going to be the

same," he stops to take a big bite of the pancakes and hums appreciatively. "These are good, thank you."

"It's no big deal. I was excited to walk somewhere, even if it was just the kitchen."

"How's it feeling?" He glances towards her still wrapped knee, relieved at the lack of visible swelling.

"Good," she wiggles her toes and flexes her heel as far as she can with the currently stiff, tight joint. "A littleâ€|stubborn, but it doesn't hurt."

"I'm glad. Don't go crazy on it while I'm gone, alright?" He tries to keep his tone light, but she can tell he's genuinely nervous and frowns.

"I'm thinking a short walk with the dogs, they could use the exercise," her face cracks into a sheepish grin. "Toothless broke his diet this morning."

"_He_ did?" Hiccup snorts.

"I had no choice, he used the huge, shiny eye technique on me."

"The old huge, shiny eye defense. I'm shocked you're still breathing," he shakes his head at the wolf and Astrid nudges him again with her shoulder, lingering for a warm second.

"It was a close one."

They sit in silence for a few moments then set their plates aside, hopefully out of range of searching canines with surprisingly long reach. Astrid slumps down into the blankets on her side of his bed, wiggling her feet under the comforter and getting comfortable. Hiccup yawns just looking at her.

"So, what was breakfast really about?" He asks, smiling to himself as her hand sneaks over to lace with his.

"You never held me back," she admits quietly, maintaining almost cautious eye contact. "You were just beingâ€|reasonable. I was being crazy."

"You did think that Ruff was right."

"I wanted her to be right," Astrid curls in on herself, good knee curling to her midsection as Hiccup's fingers tighten around hers. "Because she was so confident about all of this, about me, but I knew she wasn't."

"I wish she were right too," Hiccup nods, setting his jaw forward and remaining resolute. "But you need time."

"Which is why you're doing this with me," she manages a smile, scooting a little closer and resting her temple on his thigh through the blankets. He brushes tangled bed head back from her face with his free hand and she sighs. "I know it's not your favorite ideaâ€|" "

"That's not it," he cuts her off, fingers drumming lightly on her scalp as he thinks. "It'sâ€"It's all about my leg, isn't it?"

"If you don't want toâ€" Astrid frowns, biting her lip. "I hadn't thought about it that way."

"I don'tâ€"I mean," he sighs, the words difficult to find and slower than normal. "I don't know how I feel about all of these parallels they'reâ€"you're not like me."

He thought about it a lot the night before, struggling to go to sleep even though he should have been thoroughly exhausted. This entire scheme is based on some incorrect foundation that he and Astrid share something damaged and in his case cemented.

She's going to get better and he's not.

It's not necessarily jealousy, but it's something close to it. The feeling he gets when she goes to bed early and he's stuck staying up late doing homework.

He's so unbelievably happy for her that this is going to work out, that her entire life isn't going to be altered by this bad luck injury, but all he can think is that everything changed for him with one misstep. One step to the right or left and he would have been fine. Three feet away from the curb and Astrid would be untouched.

"What do you mean I'm not like you?" She frowns, drawing slow circles and long lines on his good knee, tickling his skin even through layers of blankets. "Because Iâ€"we're sort of in the same boat right now. No one else asks me how my knee is doing _today_, it's just how's it doing period. Everyone else thinks it's some continuous upslope when it's reallyâ€" "

"A day to day thing," he finishes the sentence, hand sliding down to grip her shoulder and fiddle with the soft sleeve of her shirt. "I knowâ€"I'm not going to get better, Astrid."

"I'd rather be permanently broken than fixed and not as good as before," she admits. "At least you'reâ€"everything you do is more than people expect. Everyoneâ€"I used to be great, and I want to be great again but what if I can't?"

"So you're saying you'd rather be on crutches forever than never run some insane five minute mile again?" The question hangs in the air, the answer indefinably crucial.

"Absolutely," she glowers at his mismatched feet under the covers. "And I'm not trying to belittle your leg, not at all, I justâ€" "

"It's an excuse," he attempts to understand, chocolate taste still sweet and incongruous on the back of his tongue. She nods slowly against him, good knee curling closer to her chest. "But it's notâ€" "

"If you could chooseâ€"If you could go back and never lose your leg, would you?"

"Of courseâ€"Iâ€" he starts before faltering unexpectedly, mouth flapping a few times before he stops to think. "By never lose my leg, what do you mean? As in, not save Spike or somehow land three feet to the left?"

"Either? Both?" She shrugs, staring at the feet and trying to remember what it looked like when he had two.

Less original. Less _Hiccup_. Moreâ€|_normal_.

"I don't regret running in there, but I do wish I'd landed somewhere else. I wish that rock hadn't hit me, Iâ€" he reaches up and fingers the scar, now flat and shiny against his forehead, hidden by his hair.

"I don't know if you'd still be you," Astrid admits, drumming her fingers against his leg before stretching her arm out and cupping the edge of his stump. "I don't know if you would haveâ€|"

"Filled out?" He laughs, staring at her fingers curled around that space that seems so natural and so wrong at the same time.

"No-I don't know if you would be so determined. I don't know if you would haveâ€|" she swallows hard and smooths a thumb over the edge of his shortened shin. "I don't know if we would have made it, if you would have stuck it out when I wasâ€|dealing with _things_. You became this guy who doesn'tâ€"No matter how upset I am about something, you're stable andâ€"You're different because of it. I don't know if it's better, but it's different."

"You can't know that."

"I can guess it," Astrid nods. "You're different, and I love you. So I'd be really disappointed if you hadn'tâ€|changed."

"You can't blame me for thinking about it," Hiccup sighs, still mesmerized by her fingers, so lovingly curled around him.

"I can't," she nods, giving his leg one last stroke and pulling her arm back respectfully. "But if you don't want to do this thing with me, I understand." She sits up, grinning at him. "No matter how much time I spent convincing you yesterday."

"Oh, I'll still do it with you," he smiles. "Because you're going to take your time, and get better, and be great again."

"Because of you," she admits with a resolute nod.

"Thanks, Astrid."

"Hey, you can always talk to me about this stuff."

He thinks of when he didn't used to be able to, when there was that wall of misunderstanding between them, and is unbelievably glad for the clear air between them now.

"Thanks anyway."

"Well, we gimps have to stick together."

Astrid never thought she'd see the day that Hiccup would roll his eyes at one of her dumb leg jokes.

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It's a window to an alternate universe, watching Hiccup suit clad and devious, bent over an open laptop perusing a set of carefully compiled talking points. She imagines how proud his father would be and is a little infuriated with the fact that this really is so unbelievably easy for him.

The arguing just comes naturally.

She's glad to have him on her side, but she can't say she's particularly overjoyed to be sitting here feeling demure. He's still determined to win, to argue that unused contract further, to get something else for her. She's sure that he just wants to be right, that some deep-seated competitive instinct is keeping him from lying down until someone changes their mind.

Not to mention that he and Fishlegs spent hours last weekend pouring over NCAA records and compiling a series of statistics.

He pulls up a spreadsheet of their findings that practically deters her eyes with its dense numbers, and rifles through a column of numbers, annotating beside them in green text. She reads over his shoulder for a minute before she reconciles the '80% chance of returning to pre-fall condition' with herself.

80% seems low.

It's his strategy to postpone a necessary race until Spring, where that 80% becomes significant, but right now it feels like doubt. She looks down at the scar on her knee, still stiff even after a week off of bed-rest. The knobby pink tissue peeks out from her skirt like a monster in a child's closet

She should feel strong showing it off, but it seems more like leaving a raw, naked wound exposed to the air, daring some brat to rub salt in it.

The chances of her racing in September aren't great.

40%, according to some formula Fishlegs seemed confident about, grinning down at records sprawled across their dining room table in front of him. Using actual college athletes who messed up a knee, 40% were back to competing within six months.

And somehow, that includes sprains and osteohematomas and all of those nothing injuries that Astrid has always ignored and brushed off. Although a sprain at the wrong time did almost do her in.

The back of her knee throbs, reminding her that it's still pulpy, not yet frozen solid and trustworthy beneath her.

She's never had to worry about being in the top 40% of anything until now.

Well, except height.

But beyond all of these doubts, she's feeling very average, and she can't say that she likes it. Of course it makes sense, they have access to a lot of data on average college athletes and their average recovery times, and the only way they can come up with some magically influential number is to treat her as one of them. She hates it.

She's not unlucky or special or lazy, she's just an average twenty two year old healthy female, and that's how she's going to heal.

And if she's average, she's fiftieth percentile, and there's was absolutely no chance that she would have raced in September anyway.

No matter what Fishlegs would critique in that line of logic, she hurt Hiccup and her knee over something impossible. It's like stepping on his face to jump and grab the moon.

Futile and embarrassing .

Hiccup is murmuring to himself around a battered ballpoint clamped between white, gapped teeth, and he hums emphatically before dipping back down to an unmistakably shy mutter. She recognizes the sound of him practicing a presentation and filling in the audience's crowded replies.

"Having both sides of the conversation?" She asks, setting her hand on his on the keyboard.

"Just trying to guess what they're going to say," he sighs with the pen now in his hand, tapping against the opposite armrest.

"They'll say that they want you to do the shoe ad with me."

"Because of my leg," Hiccup scoffs like a random stranger saw his freckles and told him to put on sunscreen.

His reservations from the week before are gone, and he's back to his normal self. Physical freckles, that's what his leg is to him, and she wishes she were half as strong.

"Because we match."

"For now," he nods sympathetically, squeezing her fingers and turning back to his screen. "Honestly, I'm waiting for you to realize how sappy this whole idea is and go back to racing in September."

"I'm not betting everything on 40%, Hiccup, I'm not an idiot."

"Aw, come on, don't listen to that," he smiles and points to a column that contains a formula she's never seen before. "Fish sent it through a filter that statistics guys use for extra conservative estimates. The actual chance is something like 62%, if you go by historical values."

"So you're playing hardball with these guys?" Astrid smiles to herself, somehow enjoying the idea. "Why? We already know we're going the other way here."

"I'm hoping I can get them to offer us more to do the whole 'love shoes' thing," he uses her name for the unfortunate circumstance, unable to find a suitable synonym. "Plus, I started out with hardball, I can't exactly backtrack now."

"You started out?" She starts to ask him, realizing that she never paused to really talk to him about his previous meeting.

"Mr. Haddock, Miss Hofferson? They'll see you in the conference room now," the receptionist cuts them off, alternating her too piercing eyes between Hiccup's metal foot clacking on the marble floor and his stoic face. Astrid squeezes his hand and catches up to his loping gait with a hop on her good foot.

They walk into the conference room, centered around a long table half filled with men in crisp grey suits. Mr. Ryan is at one head of the table, grinning at Astrid and gesturing towards the seats next to another man. The seating arrangement appears to be purposefully lopsided, leaving two seats to be filled and make the room symmetrical.

Hiccup adjusts his grip on his sleek laptop, calmly striding to the edge of the room and sitting at the other head of the table, staring at Mr. Ryan with unfamiliar and incredibly steely green eyes. Astrid wavers for a millisecond before following and sitting on his right, hands folded on the edge of the shiny tabletop.

"Now, let's get this over with," Hiccup grins, pulling a thick brown file from under his laptop and producing a crisp, notably unsigned copy of the last revision of Astrid's contract. "I still don't like it."

He thumps a disappointed thumb on the stack of papers and slides them slightly towards the center of the table, eyes mischievously serious.

Astrid's tongue goes dry in her mouth and she licks her lips as discretely as possible, hands clenching together.

Wow.

That's 'ok, wow.

She likes that. She likes that a little too much.

"We wrote in the changes that you requested," Mr. Ryan frowns, nervously gesturing to the man on his right, who flicks on a projector with a shiny, silver remote. "And we threw in a five year merchandising contract." Astrid raises her eyebrows at that, nudging Hiccup's good foot under the table with nervous toes.

She'd barely gotten one look at the contract through all of his scheming with Fish, and this is all starting to seem more pomp than useful. If they play it safe, maybe they can get the merchandising contract with the other idea.

That means free stuff, doesn't it?

"I saw that," Hiccup pretends to peruse the stack of papers, flipping through them too fast to possibly read before shoving them aside. "I

still don't like it. You're getting a lot more than a spokesperson with Astrid Hofferson's support, and your deal should reflect that."

Has her name ever been _sexy_ before? Because right now, she can't think of a better way to describe it. Or at least the way Hiccup says it.

She wants to _make_ him say it.

It takes an irrational amount of resolve to keep her hands on the table, together, rather than letting one slide underneath to find his knee. Or thigh.

Or something higher up.

What? Where is this coming from?

"She's a first time candidate-"

"And she's the best candidate that you're going to get. You need to woo her just like you would some household name ," he nods, and the confidence is magnetic.

She...She shouldn't be into this, should she? The fact that Hiccup is controlling, practically _bullying_, this room should be infuriating, given how she feels about her nearly sacred control.

But he's on her side, he's fighting for her with those clever words. And there's something about the glint in his eye, similar to the expression that lights up when he fixes something, or figures out a difficult problem, but more devious. This is _fun_ for him, he's enjoying dribbling these grown men like they're toys.

He's normally so gentle with her, and she appreciates it, really. It's respectful and kind, and so wonderfully _Hiccup_. But he doesn't need to be that way _all_ the time, does he? She knows he respects her, just listening to him makes it obvious. He loves her and respects her and is going to do everything he can to make this work.

So maybe it's not strange that she wants to see more of this side of him...all of this side of him without those pesky clothes in the way. She trusts him, and she wants to explore this new, hard-eyed Hiccup. She wants him to explore her too, it's a two sided thing.

Unless he has different ideas. She's open to all of his ideas.

It wouldn't be hard to climb onto his lap and rip off his shirt. Maybe in the car. Maybe in the handicapped bathroom stall.

"We would like to show you a betterâ€|visualized concept of the other idea," Mr. Ryan starts, standing to hover beside the projector screen, looking at Astrid with a warm smile. "I'm sure that Henryâ€" "

"Mr. Haddock," Hiccup corrects the man, shoulders erect under his blazer as he sits up straight in his chair.

Astrid fidgets, suddenly far too hot.

Maybe she wants him to rip off her shirt.

"Anyway," Mr. Ryan chortles, awkward like a teenager in a too big frame, too soon, unfamiliar with wide shoulders, "I'm sure you've heard all about it, Astrid, and we're hoping to convince you two to give it some thought."

"I hope it's worth thinking about," she nods and smiles, and can feel Hiccup's muted grin on the side of her neck like a diffuse sun. Hardball. She can play hardball, then they can both go out to the car and continue playing hardball.

They're parked in a far corner of the parking garage, aren't they?

She tries to decide how much she cares as the projector clicks all of the way to life, white waiting screen replaced with a red Nike symbol on a black background.

"We'll start off with some of your Worlds footage, Astrid," Mr. Ryan speaks only to her and she keeps her face placid, nodding pleasantly as her mind fixates on the likely imagined warmth radiating from Hiccup's leg. The reel plays, tastefully grainy as though they're trying to echo some other, long ago time, and it all feels like yesterday. She recognizes herself breaking that winning tape, grinning and stumbling forward towards a cheering Hiccup.

She'd never realized that they caught him on film before, but it makes her feel better. It doesn't hurt nearly as bad to see herself earning that gold knowing that she has his support even now.

She's supported far beyond this room, even outside of the strangely enthralling man sitting beside her. Not quite Hiccup, more Henry Haddock, and what he could be if he wanted the power within his reach. Not the boy cheering in the video, but the man that she fully plans to ravage in the parking lot, privacy or no.

Similar and hers.

"Then, we're going to move into the story of your injuryâ€¦" It's the CU newspaper, that Worlds medal shot on the front page next to a headline romanticizing her injury into something tragic. 'Star Runner out for Season' like people are going to be disappointed, or missing her. "And then we're going to need some work from you Astrid, we're going to interview Henâ€¦"Mr. Haddock," a tingle shoots down Astrid's spine and she sits up even straighter, refocusing her eyes. "And we're going to talk about how you met, why you two are such an obviously dynamic coupleâ€¦"

Dynamic in a bed. Dynamic in the front seat of his car, steering wheel against her back while she grinds up against hot, hardâ€¦"

"â€¦focus too much on me," Hiccup is leaning forward on interested elbows, oblivious to the strong line of his jaw, thrown into delicious shadow by the gleaming white projector screen. "I have nothing to do with Astrid's fantastic running career, you don't need me to impress people."

Astrid's toes curl in her shoes, pulling at the tight cords of her knee and temporarily bringing her closer to reality.

She doesn't like reality. In reality, Mr. Haddock is wearing far too many clothes.

"There's no contest here that Astrid's career has been amazing," when Mr. Ryan compliments her, no matter how slick his haircut or suit, it's just not satisfying as when Hiccup does. No, not Hiccup. Mr. Haddock.

She's never been into the control thing, maybe sometimes, in the heat of the moment, it's thrilling when he flips them over or tickles her into teasing submission. But now? She wants this strange Mr. Haddock character to yank up her skirt and bend her over the table.

She wants him hard-balling with her in the morning, hands clamped on her waist as he whispers in her ear, stroking into her from behind.

She wantsâ€œ"

"Then why do you need me and my fancy foot to sell something when you already have her?" He compliments, gesturing towards her with long, surprisingly elegant fingers.

She can think of far better uses for those hands.

"This isn't about selling something," And Mr. Ryan's eyes light up for the first time since they've entered the room, drawing Astrid temporarily from her hazy existence. "This is about telling a story, the story of your support and love andâ€œ"

"Shoes?" Hiccup snorts, arching an eyebrow and leaning back in his chair, too snarky to really be professional and all the hotter for it.

Did someone crank up the thermostat in here? Because it feels like she's about to pass out.

"We'd like to be a part of Astrid's recovery." Mr. Ryan smiles and the other exec's nod in agreement, a quiet backdrop.

"Whatever you would pay me, I want it to go to Astrid," Hiccup nods, done with the problem. "All of it. And she wants that merchandising contract," Mr. Ryan falters and Hiccup's blazing eyes narrow as he starts to tap his metal foot against the leg of his chair. Click. Click. Click, click, click, clickâ€œ"

She can realize the genius. He's reminding them of what they're looking at, what they want and what they're never going to get again. Astrid senses her shot and reaches across the table to grab his hand, shivering at the contact.

His hands are warm, scalding against the pads of her fingers and addictive like a campfire on a crisp fall night.

He smiles, lacing his fingers with hers and ceasing the infernal tapping of his foot, leaving the room in baited silence.

"When Astrid returns to professional racing, we have full rights," Mr. Ryan counters, a surprisingly level negotiator, and Hiccup turns to her with a quirked eyebrow, asking her permission.

"I'll agree to that," she answers for herself, and when his fingers squeeze hers, she wonders how quickly she can get naked.

But then again, how naked does she really need to get?

Well, it's up to him.

Somehow that thought is absolutely thrilling and she swallows, throat quavering against the back of her tongue. The dogs are spending the night in her bedroom. They're shutting the door. All night.

As long as she can keep that fire in his eyes.

"We'll send the contract your way," Mr. Ryan grins, clapping one of his executives on the shoulder with an open palm and remaining standing. Hiccup pushes himself up, gently letting go of Astrid's hand and reaching out to shake the other man's, nodding solemnly.

"Looking forward to it," his eyes harden one last time as he lets go, tucking his laptop under his arm and leaving the rejected contract on the table. "And I'm hoping you won't make me discuss numbers." Hiccup's voice dips into his last sentence and Astrid locks her knees to stay upright.

Far too many clothes. There are far too many clothes between them.

She wishes that all of the men would leave first, and they could make use of the conference table.

And the chairs.

Mr. Ryan pauses to shake her hand, warm and almost apologetic, as if he wishes he'd given her a true deal to start with and avoided dealing with Hiccup—Mr. Haddock—entirely.

Astrid can't wait to deal with Mr. Haddock. Just the thought of it makes her inappropriately giddy and she swallows a grin like a bitter pill, following Hiccup out of the room and down the hallway, clicking on the floor in a strange rhythm, three high heels and one muffled dress shoe.

A strange sort of nervousness blooms in her chest as they stride into the parking garage, footsteps falling to quieter echoes off the concrete ceiling. Hiccup is talking, excited and driven, still oozing that nearly dangerous charm as his free hand dances through the air, animated and energetic.

"—went better than I hoped. I think I scared them, I honestly—wow, that was crazy," he smoothes that hand over the stark line of his jaw and she quivers, fingers trembling against the sides of her thigh.

How does she—maintain this? Why does she want to so badly?

She wantsâ€|she wants him looking at her like he meant all of those nearly callus compliments. Like she really is something special and fantastic, and like he wants to show her, like he wants to take care of her and give her what _he _knows she wants, rather than what she asks for. She wants his hands claiming her like they claimed everything in that room, strong and brave and confident andâ€"

He lets go of her fingers and unlocks the car, grinning to himself as he sets the laptop in the backseat.

"And I didn't even need the math! They justâ€|listened. Why doesn't anyone else listen like that?" He laughs to himself, running a hand back through his combed slick hair, leaving an auburn mop in its place. "Why don't you listen like that?" He snarks, reaching for the front door handle.

"Make me," she mumbles, fiddling with the blonde hair tickling at her collarbone, resisting some strange urge to twirl it around her fingers.

"Huh?" He turns to look at her with those blazing eyes and she falters, blushing and stepping back onto a stiff knee with a barely there wince.

"Nothing," she laughs, staring at her feet and strangely almost enjoying the mystery of the situation. She wants to poke Mr. Haddock with a stick and test out the bull's horns.

She wishes the car were bigger, or that she could justify dragging him to the bench in front of the elevator. She wishes he'd drag her over there, tell her how to thank him, how toâ€"

"Coming?" Hiccup laughs at her hovering three feet from the door, poised and nervous. "Or do we need to stand here longer?"

"No, no, I'm coming," she steps forward and opens the passenger door, fingers uncharacteristically leaden and useless. It takes a fidgety moment before she realizes that comfortable is impossible in her current state of mind. She'd be more comfortable with less clothes. Less clothes and more hands, and that commandeering layer of snark blanketing her from head to toeâ€" "Hey Hiccup?" Astrid asks almost meekly, both knees wobbly and rattling her feet against the rubber floor mat in a hectic staccato.

"Hmm?" He fumbles with his seatbelt, and her hand darts out to stop him, grabbing his wrist and squeezing just enough to be alarming. The clasp thunks against the door and he looks down at her, alarmed.

"You seriously made them call you _Mr. Haddock_," her voice shakes against her racing pulse as her hand slides off of his wrist to grope at his thigh, high enough to send deep auburn eyebrows towards his hairline.

"Too much?" He smiles, not quite sheepish enough to dispel the veil of still delicious authority still orbiting around him.

"Not at all," she bites her lip, watching his long pale fingers fall from the steering wheel back to his lap. "It was pretty hot actually."

"Er, it was?" He pauses and frowns and Astrid quells a strange shyness, determined to keep him inflated and demanding.

"You had them eating out of your hand," she laughs, cheeks flushing as he sits up a little straighter, accepting the compliment. "And this new deal?" She's looking at him like he's the last glass of lemonade on a hot summer day, his own personal sauna, and he reaches up to loosen his tie. "Damn," she purrs, licking her lips and leaning towards him, fingers gripping at his inner thigh.

"I'm just glad that you let me help," he fights against a stutter under her downright predatory gaze. She shrugs and draws far too much attention to the v-neck of her blouse.

Was it always that revealing? Because it seemed perfectly demure ten minutes ago.

"Me too," and her grin is momentarily genuine before falling back into something steamy. Her hand slides from his leg up his waist, gripping his ribs through far too many layers of clothes. "Mr. Haddock."

A strange rush pulses through her veins, biting and empowering near desperate fingers to slide under his suit coat, gentle and searching across his chest. He shivers, teeth clamping together audibly, and she smiles.

"What are you doing?" He clears his throat and laughs almost nervously, threatening that domineering energy by pressing himself back into the seat. She takes the opportunity to slide over the center console, sitting sideways in his lap with her feet in the bucket of the passenger seat.

"You weren't nervous in there," she purrs into his ear, lips brushing softly against the shell of his ear and sending electric tingles down her spine. Her fingers grip at his lapel and pull her closer, "Mr. Haddock."

"Public parking lot," he reminds her, blush deliciously disappearing underneath his collar as Astrid's lips find the ticklish skin behind his hear. Her hand slides up his chest and yanks his tie entirely loose, starting in on the top button of his shirt.

"I don't care," she kisses along the clean shaven line of his jaw, inhaling the combined scent of Hiccup and musky shaving soap.

"Astridâ€|" he pouts, adjusting his seat and trying to hide his interest. She grabs his hand and slides it up her thigh, under her skirt.

"You can't do that," she grinds her hips down purposefully against him and he bites back a groan, short fingernails biting into the skin of her leg. "You can't get all demanding like that and leave me hanging."

"How long have you been planning this?" He asks, peering around the lot and searching for any people among the cars. It's empty and his hand grips her leg, pulling her unconsciously closer to his

chest.

"Ever since you took over the meeting," she laughs into his ear, fingers tangling into his hair and ruining whatever order he'd managed to create that morning. "And it didn't hurt anything when you told them to pay me everything."

"You liked that?" He asks with a laugh that's far too light for the atmosphere of the car. "It just seemed fair."

"Stop being so humble," Astrid grumbles, kissing him and getting a bit lost against his lips when his fingers slide up and toy with the edge of her underwear, maddening and flirtatious. He breaks the kiss with a grin that's almost cocky and sits back against his seat, checking for an audience only one more time before peering down at her through careful eyes, like he's afraid of going too far.

"So that-that actually turned you on?"

"Yes," she nods slowly, pressing her hips down against his and biting her lip. "I wasn't just kidding around when I said that it was hot," she attempts to snap, but the glint is back in his eyes, tempering her tone and threatening to melt her entirely.

"Huh," he shrugs, nuzzling against her neck and pushing her hair out of the way. She can feel his upturned lips, blazing and somehow notably confident against her skin. "That's interesting."

"Interesting?" She gasps as his hand slides the rest of the way under her underwear, massaging a handful of her rear and pulling her closer to him with a capable second hand on her waist.

"You liked it when I took control," he comments, tone almost innocent as he dives back into her neck, sucking an obvious patch of skin beneath her ear until her fingers are trembling slightly, struggling with the next button of his shirt. "That's interesting."

His hand slides back around her leg, knuckles hot and callused against her inner thigh as his thumb flicks across her clit. She whimpers and slides a hand around to the back of his neck, holding herself upright as he starts to rub her through her underwear, firm and precise.

"Hiccupâ€¦" she moans into his ear and he pulls her closer with the hand not busy under her skirt, fingers tight and demanding on her ribcage even as his thumb smooths over her blazer, soothing and sweet. There are still too many clothes, far far too many clothes.

"Funny, I thought all of this was about Mr. Haddock," he laughs, capturing her lips with his and cradling the back of her head with a gentle, firm hand and stroking her tongue with his. Two fingers slip past her underwear and slide smoothly inside of her and he neatly swallows her moan, pulling away and breathing hard against the side of her face. "God, you're worked up."

His fingers curl inside of her and she leans against his neck, hands slipping down between them and unbuckling his belt.

"Backseat?"

"No, here," he insists, pulling out of her and dragging her underwear down and abandoning them on the passenger seat before diving back in, stroking her carefully and arching his hips in an attempt to help her with his pants. "Take off your jacket."

"Just a second...your pants are being stubborn-"

"Now," he snaps, reaching down and popping his button free with the hand that's not busy driving her crazy with feather light touches up and down her thighs. "Take it off." Her face splits into a broad grin as she shrugs out of it, elbow knocking against the steering wheel as she frees her final hand and throws it into the backseat. "Better," he pulls his hand from under her skirt and starts unbuttoning her shirt, stopping halfway down and dragging her bra straps off of her shoulders and tugging the bra down around her waist. "Much, much better." He cups her chest with a warm hand and pulls her mouth back to his.

He doesn't seem too concerned about people anymore.

She moans into his mouth as he rolls a pebbled nipple between gentle fingers, and her hands are shaking as she struggles with his pants, wiggling them off of his hips far enough to free him through the flap of his boxers. He groans and bucks up into her hand, reaching back up under her skirt and resuming his flighty stroking.

"How? How?" She asks against his lips, trying to rock against his hand even though it won't give her enough substance to be satisfying.

"Here," he grabs the back of her right knee with a gentle grip and moves to swing it across his lap, but she winces as it bends between them. "Never mind," he sets her foot gently back on the seat and turns to her, fingers drumming thoughtfully on the inside of her thigh. "We could-I mean-"

"Just do it," Astrid cuts off his babbling and he falls back into character, eyes bright and scanning her disheveled form.

"Right," he nods, grabbing her waist and lifting her until her head just brushes the ceiling and turning her to face him. "Does your leg fit between the chair and the door?" He puffs, voice slightly strained from the weight and odd angle.

"Hm" she carefully lines up her toes, shrugging in a futile attempt to displace the bra strap wrapped and binding around her arm. "I think," she slides her ankle through the gap and nods, bracing her hands against his shoulders in an attempt to lower herself down slowly. He pulls her tight against his chest, shoving the rest of her leg through the tight fit a little faster than intended. She winces at the cool plastic handle of the backdoor against her knees and his eyes widen apologetically.

"Are you ok? I'm sorry, is your knee?" His panicked tone is almost enough to kill the mood. Almost.

She grinds forward against him, moaning at the contact of their

exposed skin beneath her mostly rucked up skirt and he tightens his hands on her hips, looking worried.

"I'm good, it doesn't hurt, see?" She goes to pull her leg out of the gap and frowns as her knee catches on the seatbelt's plastic housing. A sharper tug makes her wince and Hiccup stops her from trying again with a gentle hand on her thigh. "It's stuck," she peers down at her leg, trying to wiggle it down. "I could probably get it out if-"

"Hmm," his hands slide up to cup her waist and pull her into a kiss as his hips nudge against hers. "If it doesn't hurt, I like this."

"It doesn't hurt," she barely recognizes her own breathless voice as his hand slips back inside of her shirt to caress her bare skin, hips pressing his hardness against her. "But I can'tâ€|" She demonstrates, trying to lean up enough to slide onto him and failing with a frustrated huff. His hand slips under her skirt and resumes toying with her.

"We're still in the car," he reminds her, fingers sliding back inside of her, gasping when she bucks simultaneously against him. "In public."

"Don't care," she gasps, kissing the side of his neck and struggling to free her knee with a wince. "I _really_ don't care."

"Astrid," he warns, head lolling to the side as his hand starts to churn against her. She bites his earlobe and rocks forward against him, pressing against his shaft enough to make him groan. "Get...how do we get your knee out?" He gives in with a grunt as she nudges her hips against his again, biting her lip as his thumb presses against her.

"Maybeâ€|oh yeah, there?" Her eyes flutter at the expert curling of his fingers inside of her, hands clamping harder on his shoulders. "Ok, okâ€|umm, scootâ€|"scoot your seat forward?" She suggests, trying to free her knee again and whining as he flicks his thumb across her.

"Ok," he nods, free hand sliding down her thigh to grab his seat's adjustment handle and yanking it upwards. She grinds forward against him again, kissing his neck and burying her face in his shoulder as her movement distills into a slow, purposeful rhythm.

It's practically torture, being so close to her, so impossibly near to being inside of her. His fingers curl purposefully against that textured spot on her warm channel and she rocks against him, lips colliding sloppily and near desperately with his. She's panting against his mouth, fingers sliding down his chest, suddenly nimble as she opens his shirt the rest of the way, groping at his chest and writhing against him.

He slams the seat forward harder than he'd intended, her leg popping free from its plastic cage with a squeak as his knees slam into the dash. Astrid's back knocks against the horn with a blaring ring and she tosses her head back, hips jerking against his hand near frantically.

"Yes yes yes," she groans, head falling back against the steering wheel and ignoring the horn as his hand finally starts to tip her over that edge.

"Off the horn," he warns, hand clasping around her back and attempting to lift her. She moans even louder, stiffening around his fingers and rocking madly against his hardness.

"Fuck," she squeaks, still bucking.

"Dammit," he lets go of her back, and it's his imagination that the earsplitting sound gets louder as he feels around under the steering column for the one crucial wire. Astrid pants in his ear, cooing softly as her body starts to relax, pinned so soft and enticing between him and the wheel. His crotch gives an indignant throb, warm and wet and so utterly left out at the same time.

He finds the wire and pulls, filling the car with a near deafening silence.

"Holyâ€¦holyâ€¦Iâ€¦"wow," Astrid falls limp against the steering wheel as Hiccup scoots his seat back to its normal position. His member slides out from under her skirt, painfully erect and wet enough from her fun to cool dramatically in the still air. Astrid's half open shirt, bra contorted around her remarkably flushed stomach, isn't helping anything.

He wants to grab her and slam her down onto him, driving her against that now silent horn until she can't remember her own name. Until she falls apart around him, hands clutching at his shoulders while she moans in his ear.

That horn was a thirty second scream, and they can't have that long until someone comes to investigate.

Does he care?

He looks at her appraisingly one last time, thighs spread lazy and satisfied on either side of his knees as she pushes her sweaty hair out of her face, still panting.

He should care. Indecent exposureâ€¦all those dumb laws that don't bear thinking about. God, he wants her. This isn't fair. This isâ€¦

His body wails in protest as he reaches down and shoves his revving engine back into his pants, wincing as it presses against his zipper. He pats her thighs and scoops her delightfully limp body from his lap, depositing it unceremoniously in the passenger seat and buckling his seatbelt.

"Come on, we should probably get out of here," he looks both ways, half expecting to see a stern security-man jogging down sloped concrete floor.

"But you didn't," she glances towards the tent in his pants and licks her lips, absent-minded and so impossibly tempting.

"The entire building could hear that horn," he tries to sound stern, but his face breaks into a broad grin as he catches sight of her

shrugging her bra back into place and hurrying to fasten her buttons.
"But thatâ€" "

"That was insane," Astrid laughs, off balance as she tries to fix her skirt, propped on only her good foot. "Did you seriously rip something out of the steering wheel?"

"I couldn't get you off the horn," he grimaces at the wire hanging down and the hour he'll spend fixing it. But Astrid's flushed and elated face is absolutely worth it and he's grinning as he slams the car into gear and pulls out of the spot, sending her reeling for her seatbelt.

"It was hot," she shrugs, laughing and adjusting her mishandled bra-straps with a shimmy. "It wasâ€" "

"I'm driving," he punches the accelerator, whipping the wheel around a turn and surging out onto the road. "We'll be home in twenty, alright?"

"Looking forward to it," she sighs, crossing her legs. "Can you make it fifteen?" His crotch throbs at the mention and his foot sinks deeper towards the floor .

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**I don't know what I like more, Toothless the sous chef, leg talk, intimidating Hiccupâ€"or Astrid's reaction to intimidating Hiccup. And the smut. This really does cover the bases. **

**Thank you for last chapter's reviews, I'll be responding to them soon, and please don't forget to drop one for this chapter? I have to know if I'm crazy, or if this was actually the best lemon I've ever written. Because I think it's up there. **

**Thanks for reading. **

22. Chapter 22

**Sorry for the gap here, guys. Life, it's a doozy.
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Driving was not as bad as Astrid expected it to be, and she's smiling as she climbs out of her dusty car into the Berk High parking lot after a long day studying for finals. The asphalt is mostly empty, everyone but those last few distance stragglers went home an hour ago and Gobber is lonely on the field, coaching a younger looking boy who's running laps like he knows he has promise.

Perfect. She doesn't think she could do this in front of an audience, it's embarrassing enough as is.

She edges down the hill, hobbling a little on her bad knee and feeling unreasonably proud and strong when she keeps it together on the slightly soggy clay track. The boy's step falters and she knows she's been recognized even before Gobber shouts her name in greeting.

"Astrid!" He nearly skips over to her, one arm yanking her into a fatherly hug that she accepts willingly after years getting used to it. "Ye should have told me ye were comin'. I'd have asked the girls te stay and get a lecture."

"Not really in lecturing shape right now," she laughs a bit awkwardly, skirting around the fact that she hasn't heard from him since she got hurt and she's entirely unsure whether he was mad or giving her space.

"How's it doin'?" He steps back from the hug and yells a time at the boy who's behind on his splits, if Gobber's tone means anything.

"Alright," she shrugs, looking down at her scar through the brace. "It's acting like a knee againâ€¦sometimes. On the good days."

"Jus' a second," he holds a hand out towards her and blows his whistle, signaling for the boy to stop running. The kid mutters something to Gobber and points at Astrid, and the coach shrugs. The boy looks at her nervously before jogging over and wiping a hand on his shorts and offering it to her.

"Hi, Astrid, I'm a huge fanâ€¦"

"Oh God, stop with that," she laughs a bit awkwardly, shaking the kid's clammy hand. "What's your name?"

"I'm Liam," he laughs, a bit awestruck and dropping her hand. "Your Worlds race a few months ago? That's the whole reason I switched to distance. I used to be a sprinter butâ€¦" He clams up like he might have said too much and she smiles to put him at ease, looking to Gobber for help. He surreptitiously avoids the eye contact.

"Well, you've got the best coach in the league," she gives the man the credit anyway and he cracks a small smile, scuffing his prosthetic against the grass in an all too familiar 'aw shucks' motion. So he's not too mad to take a compliment, apparently.

"Erâ€¦" he steps back, only a few inches taller than her and lanky. She can see why Gobber is taking a special interest, and she has to say that the kid has a great attitude. Sure, she ran all the extra hours in high school, but she never managed to smile though them.

"Can I ask you something?" She blinks slowly, pulling her mind out of all those miles logged on this track, getting faster and stronger for the first time.

"Sure."

She wonders briefly if Gobber has told him all sorts of stories about her yelling at everyone, and that's why he looks legitimately afraid he's going to bite her head off.

"Are youâ€¦" he pauses and glances towards her brace and her face heats up slightly.

"I'm fine."

"But are you going to run again?" And again, it's nice to have someone understand the difference. She can be fine and still, but she can't ever really be good. She needs to move, and as much as Hiccup valiantly tries to understand, there's nothing like the sympathetic admiration radiating out of the boy in front of her. She thinks for a moment before rocking onto her braced foot and doing a couple of slow, jerky toe raises, sighing into the too warm stretch within her knee.

"That's why I'm here," she smiles and waves a hand towards her blatantly eavesdropping coach. "I think I need a coach."

Gobber barks at Liam to go home after that and stands in front of Astrid with his mismatched arms crossed. She's smart enough to feel guilty.

"Ye know, Hiccup told me ye started training again and ended yerself in the hospital." She can't bring herself to mind his stern, fatherly tone. It feels like the tough love she's going to need and she stands up a little straighter, rocking between her feet and testing for weakness. Obviously it's there, but it doesn't dare test her confidence in the moment.

"Thatâ€|that wasn't my proudest moment."

"Yer lucky ye didn't take yerself out o' the running for good wit that one," he cracks a smile, silver capped tooth in his bottom jaw glinting in the sunlight. Astrid groans and lets her head fall back onto her shoulders, shaking it exasperated.

"No puns. Not doing this if there's going to be puns."

"What do ye need help wit?" He asks, limping slightly on the way over to the lonely bleachers beside the track, and Astrid is struck with mourning an unsung resource. She should have talked to Gobber, if anyone got it, it'd be him. His running career went down with his leg in college, the worst of hers and Hiccup's worlds combined.

"Iâ€|There's a half marathon in Septemberâ€"

"The same one insistin' on put ye in the hospital?" He asks, not quite angry underneath a quirked eyebrow.

"I can be ready for it," Astrid nods, for a second so much more confident than the girl who broke all the records. "I know that I can, I justâ€|I went about it the wrong way before. And I've never raced anything that far butâ€|I don't have to, I know I don't have to, I justâ€"

"Ye want to?" He fills in, and it sounds so trivial. It's somehow childish to put in this much work and pain for something that she wants rather than what she needs. She's always needed running before, it's been this ticket to a silent mind and sound body. It paid for her college, kept her busy and collected for years when she was pretending to be far from falling apart.

College is over. No one is going to pay her for it again, once this thing with Nike wraps up.

"I guess so. I want to."

"Can I ask why?" He sits on the edge of the bleachers and stretching his legs towards the edge of the track, metal heel scraping against rough cement.

"Because I want to," she repeats dumbly, not even remotely close to cataloguing her own reasons.

"If ye're goin' te do this, I'm jus' trying to make sure it's fer the right reasons."

She remembers the first time that Gobber approached her as Hiccup's pseudo-uncle, doing all the scaring that Gerard never felt the need to. It was funny in a way, sitting next to the man on the plane to Nationals and having him ask her point blank what her intentions with Hiccup were. Like he was a virginal princess and she was some sort of bandit.

And she guesses she was, in a way, because the shelter just came down and the two men gained a massive commonality, but Hiccup was spending most of his time with her. She knows now just how jarring it is to lose the Hiccup in her life and she can imagine how Gobber must have felt.

He liked her then, tried to father her and keep up with her as much as she'd allow, but it was a formal relationship. Nothing like what she now has with the man, accumulated over years of shared Sunday football games and family barbecues. Now they're family, but when everything hit the fan with her knee he somehow became just another person to hide from.

She wonders who told him not to come around, was it Gerard, warning him about the groaning, sleepy mess on the couch? Or was it Hiccup, asking for her privacy and having the presence of mind to leave a third party on the reasonable outside of the situation?

Or did he just know?

"I'm not ready to be done yet," Astrid answers simply, still standing because she's done enough sitting for a lifetime in the last few weeks. "Or if I am ready, I want it to be on my terms, not because of my knee."

"A half-marathon, eh?" He looks at her through kind, narrowed eyes, measuring her like an untried freshman. She stands up straighter and nods, oddly encouraged by the once familiar feeling of needing to prove herself. She can do that, and she can do this, and she's going to run that race. "Ye've never run anything that long before."

"Of course I have, I've trained for five milers, that meant plenty of ten mile days. It's not much longer than that at all."

"Can ye run yet?" The question feels important, more of a test than a legitimate concern and Astrid slumps slightly at the implication of her weakness, sighing too loudly.

"No, doctor's appointment next week. Until then it's just strengthening exercises and rest," she sighs the last word rather than spit it and Gobber's face softens slightly.

"Come talk to me after that appointment, we'll see where you stand."

"Really?" She grins, and he returns the expression when her exuberance pulls her nearly effortlessly onto her toes. "Thank you. I won't be a disappointment or--"

"Train so hard yer joint blows up on ye again?"

"No, I won't do that," she nods, jittery and excited.

"And ye're ne'er a disappointment," he tells her almost sternly. She smiles. "An' can I finally come back around? Everyone was cautionin' me te stay away while ye were hurt, but ye look fine to me."

"Of course," she nods, apologetic that she is the reason for the absence that's so conspicuous in hindsight. "I promise I'm not going to bite your head off."

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It seems oddly appropriate to be back at Berk high school's track for this, back at the clay ring where arms were broken and something permanent furred out of the marrow. Hiccup is sitting on the skeletal, lonely set of bleachers, hands tucked into his pockets as he tries to ward off the pre-dawn cold. Toothless is curled by his feet, tail thumping on the dew wet ground as he looks at his boy, waiting for a cue. Hiccup doesn't have a stopwatch, and it feels wrong.

Astrid rocks back and forth on antsy heels beside him.

"I'm thinking two laps," she hedges, and the short distance isn't as embarrassing as her tongue as she feared it would be.

Two laps is better than zero, and she's beyond sick of zero.

Last weekend, both she and Hiccup walked at their college graduation and it felt like a stepping stone rather than a victory. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that they're both headed back in the fall, but for Astrid, it likely has more to do with the fact she still felt like she was limping.

"Maybe you should just see how it feels," Hiccup suggests mildly and Astrid scoffs, puffing up slightly and looking down at her securely taped knee.

"I'm sure that I can do two laps."

"Just because you can doesn't mean that you should," he reminds her, and she sighs.

"They left it up to me," she blusters, carefully bending her right knee back and grabbing her foot behind her. The joint still feels different, even eight weeks post-surgery, like someone replaced its core with a substance of a slightly different character.

Her limp is finally gone through, as of last week, and it seems to carry her weight fine.

It's probably a lost analysis. She's never going to know if her knee feels the same as before, because she never took stock of what her knee felt like in the first place. It was always just sort of _there_, sturdy under her unless it was in the throes of one of its tantrums.

"Just go easy," Hiccup warns her before slipping into a lopsided smile. "No records need breaking right this second."

"Right," she looks at him sheepishly, utterly unprepared for this strange new mindset. "I'llâ€¦I'm just going to do two. See how it feels."

"Ok," he shakes his head at her stubbornness, prosthetic swinging against the grass with a quiet swishing noise. "I'll see you in a lap then."

"Ok," she nods towards him, setting her jaw and walking over to the start of the straight away with measured, stiff footsteps.

That first hundred meters seems to stretch towards the horizon, other end of the track sloping away until the profile looks more egg than oval. She can do this. She can absolutely do this. She rocks back and forth between the balls of her feet before lunging forward a bit, leading with her right foot like she always used to.

The first step feels strange, less of a surge and more of a hop, and she rocks forward onto her left foot, which is a little quicker, eager to pick up the familiar motion. She cringes habitually before her right foot hits the ground, a bark of laughter escaping when it takes her weight without pain. She leans a little further forward, committing more to the step, springing forward onto her left foot in a rhythm that almost feels familiar, like a favorite childhood movie.

By the end of fifty meters, she's jogging, arms pumping from her shoulders as her feet rock smoothly from heel to toe, propelling her forward.

It feels excellent.

It feels so good to be back in her own skin. The heartbeat in her chest is more familiar than the slow throb of days lying on the couch, and her fingers tingle with increased blood curling into fists by her sides. She forces them to relax, experimentally relaxing her stride, toes digging into the clay.

There, that's it. That's the gait.

When she rounds that first four hundred, Hiccup is standing by the edge of his track, grinning at her with his arms crossed, like he knew this would work all along. Toothless is standing next to him, looking at Hiccup briefly for permission before trotting out on the track next to Astrid and grinning up at her with his pink tongue lolling out of his mouth.

She hadn't wanted to bring Spike this morning, just in case it didn't work, just in case she got the pit's hopes up for a run and had to squash them. It'sâ€¦|

It doesn't feel perfect. Her knee is starting to feel strange and squishy, tired like it's carrying someone heavier than her. She keeps her steps as even as she can, frowning at an unfamiliar fatigue in her chest. She's out of breath, from running less than half a mile.

It's like stepping into an alternate universe.

Toothless pulls ahead of her, smiling back over his shoulder as he lopez ahead, and she nods to herself, deciding to catch up, to restart programming that comfortable gait into her muscle memory. She pulls even with the wolf around the last curve, grinning down at him and slowing at the line before the straight away, hopping to a careful stop on her good foot.

"So?" Hiccup walks onto the track to meet her, half of his footprints rectangular and deep in the clay. His hands land on her waist, comparatively cool and comforting. "How'd it feel?"

"Iâ€"good," she decides after a moment of deliberation, smile widening until her cheeks hurt. "It felt good."

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He's not quite Mr. Haddock today, not quite the force of nature that made this all possible, but he seems bigger than Hiccup, standing up straighter and effortlessly more reliable. The Henry Haddock of her future. Their future.

But that doesn't mean Astrid can't enjoy every time they call him Mr. Haddock, and offer him things, and skirt around him like he's important and intimidating. It doesn't mean she can't enjoy his tighter than normal black track pants, and the way that his hair is combed out of eyes that look impossibly green from the top of the hill near the car. He's talking to the commercial's director, grinning reluctantly and gesturing towards still set up camera with always active hands.

She bites her lip and leans back against the hood of his car, wondering how long he's going to take. She wants to get home, she wants to cling to the idea of getting home, despite the knowledge that his dad is there with Toothless and they'll have no privacy. She wants privacy.

He grins at the director, briefly honest and excited before his face falls back to placid compliance and he glances up at her. She waves and he nods at the man one more time before heading towards her across the football field, all lanky legs and even steps on uneven feet. Her heart beat quickens, almost embarrassingly, and she bites her lip, sighing at the too full parking lot.

It's been three weeks since her tryst with Mr. Haddock in the parking garage, and the thought is still lurking embarrassingly towards the front of her mind. They haven't been anywhere quiet enough for her to justify attempting to get the car rocking again, and the garage while he was fixing the horn devolved into a dissatisfying no-go when he got irked at her for wearing improper clothing around his soldering iron. That wasn't exactly the kind of controlling she was hoping for.

"Ready to go?" He asks, tired beneath unusually tidy combed hair. He pauses in front of her, thinking for a moment before stepping forward and planting an unbearably sweet kiss in the center of her forehead that does nothing to cool her off. "I need to go home and get this _makeup_ off my face," he grimaces and she shakes the happy haze long enough to roll her eyes at him.

"You can't even tell," she climbs into the passenger seat and buckles her seatbelt, turning slightly sideways to face him.

"I'm a grown man, and they put _makeup_ on me," he frowns, staring into the rearview mirror and glaring at his face. She really can't see a difference, besides the fact that he looks well rested and older, the freckles dotting his nose slightly faded.

"It's for the cameras, they put it on me too."

"But you look great," he whines, glancing at her and pulling back out of the parking spot with a careful hand anchored on the back of her seat. "I look likeâ€¦I don't know. I need to get it off, though."

"I'll help," she offers, raising her eyebrows at him in a mild suggestion. He misses the gesture entirely, turning out onto the main road from the parking lot.

"Today was justâ€¦" He fades out, shaking his head and staring at the road in front of him, jaw clenched near randomly as he accelerates past the usual turn. She guesses he decided it's a scenic route kind of day, and that definitely doesn't do anything to make this less arousing. He even smells interesting, different, but so familiar out of this particular context. Like new shoes and fresh athletic fabric and a little sweat from the hot day, pre-race jitters at the first meet of the season before her uniform has been through the wash. "It was weird. Everyone acted like they were afraid of me, and I feel...prodded. Did you know that they gave me a box with two shoes this morning? It's like they don't have to pretend I'm some normal scary guy."

"I doubt that's what they were doing at all," she shrugs, staring at his thigh flexing through the too thin fabric of his pants as he stuffs his foot into the accelerator, cutting the engine loose over a steep rising foothill. She understands why he turned down the shorts they first tried to get him in, but she'd be lying if she said she wouldn't have enjoyed the view. "They probably just had a box of size elevens."

"I bet they forgot which foot it is," he laughs, a little persecuted beneath the veil of humor. He sounds like he needs to relax, she'd love to help him with that. "So they just gave me both. I figure that's better than getting one left shoe."

"You're reading too much into this," she shakes her head and glances out the windshield at the natural canopy of trees that they're about to drive under. She's always liked the back roads, at least since she figured them out, but right now, the lack of other drivers is more distracting than the beautiful scenery. This is probably as close to alone as they're going to get, and she's starting to like the idea that he's not wearing a belt more than ever.

"You were recording voice blurbs for an hour, I swear they spent the whole hour poking me," he shivers and she sets a hand on his thigh that's supposed to be comforting. It doesn't comfort her at all.

"I doubt they spent the _whole_ hour poking you." He elects not to answer, resting his forearm on the frame of his open window and freezing his face stoic even as a few chunks of hair free themselves in the breeze. "Maybe I should make it up to youâ€|" She offers in an obviously smoky voice. He glances demonstratively towards the water bottle in the cup holder.

When he's cranky enough, she can practically sit on his lap naked and be offered some clothes.

"I'll accept payment in the form of dog grooming, that lady who gave Toothless a bath used shampoo that smells like Lavender. The whole house is going to smell like my grandma for a month."

"You're in such a mood."

"I'm uncomfortable," he gripes, shifting in his seat and stretching his legs as much as possible.

"What is so uncomfortable?"

"These pants have tiny pockets and something is digging inâ€|" He reaches down and rummages in his pocket for a second before pulling out that wizened blue stopwatch. Gobber somehow had it this morning when he opened the track for them and it found its way into filming and started this whole mess.

That stopwatch, seeing him with it brought back all those memories, all that turmoil from when she wanted to look at him and didn't know why. Not to mention it was somehow effortlessly sexy how he stood there with it, eyes watching her near clinically, occasionally slipping down to her legs when she was close enough for it to mean something. She bets he looked at her like that in high school and she likes that particular thought probably more than she should.

It got her thinking about all the things she could have, and should have, done if she'd pulled her head out of Scott's ass sooner and taken a look around. Hiccup's hand is slightly bigger now, a new scar on his thumb just below where it curls around the blue plastic casing. She swallows hard and glances back at his placidly irritated face.

"Stop the car."

"What?"

"Stop the car, pull over," she elaborates slightly and he stares at her like she's crazy. "You heard me."

"Astrid-" He starts in that _tone_, the one that means she's acting strange. The one that he used when she was stripping him down in the front seat in a parking garage. She snaps and grabs the wheel, tugging it to the side in a way that's meant to be demonstrative, but leads to him slamming on the brakes and pulling over on the dirt shoulder, an incredibly safe ten feet away from a massive old elm

tree.

Well, safe in her opinion, he looks a little pale, even though she's seen him do much crazier stunts of his own volition.

He's braced against the seat, eyes stuck wide open as he stares out of the windshield breathing deep and raspy. The stopwatch is abandoned on his lap and she stares at it for a minute before picking it up and detangling the long black cord and impulsively draping it around his neck. He doesn't move, foot still locked stiff against the brake as the car purrs uneasily, smell of scorched tires drifting through the window.

"Hiccup?"

"You almost killed us," he turns to her, relaxing only slightly, shaking elbows still braced straight. "What were you thinking?"

"I didn't pull the wheel that hard-"

"I would have just pulled over if you _explained_ yourself-"

"I didn't want to," and at that his eyebrows start to settle in that classic 'disappointed' frown and she snaps, unbuckling her seatbelt and leaning across the console to yank at his pants.

"Whoa, there," he sits back against the seats, hands in front of him outside of the range of imminent destruction as she tugs them down to his hips, _whining_ frustrated when they won't go any further.

"Pants _off_," she complains, jerking at the drawstrings until he lifts his hips enough to drag them down over his butt. His underwear are abducted for the ride and he looks out at the road beside them, almost panicky.

"Astrid-" And she's unzipping his jacket, shoving her hand under the white tee-shirt underneath and groping him, bending down and sucking what will surely be an obvious hickey on his lower stomach. "What are you doing?" But despite the fact that this is really spur of the moment, he starts to harden and she coaxes it along, teasing his inner thighs with soft fingers. He deliberates for a moment before turning off the car and cranking the emergency brake, leaving the car in silence aside from the sound of her kissing up his stomach. Her hand squeezes his mostly hard shaft and he slumps further back into the seat. "We crashed and I'm dead. And somehow, this is heaven."

"Not yet," she leans further over the center of the car and takes him into her mouth with fantastic exuberance, bobbing her head and anchoring his hips to the seat with deft hands.

"Oh _God_," he groans and rests a gentle hand on the back of her head, panting too hard as the adrenaline hits in earnest, surging through his veins and making him almost nauseous. She pulls up for a second to breathe, cool air blowing over him and raising goosebumps along the still damp skin of his stomach before diving back in, tongue laving and licking as her lips hold tight to his shaft. "I thinkâ€¦I think I'm going to throw up."

"Why?" She mutters against his skin, bumping her head back against his hand and encouraging those long fingers to nest in her hair. He does, and she moans in spite of herself, giving him another long suck.

"Tree...don't stop," he groans, and she knows she's won this one, no matter how much he'll complain about it later. "But we almost hit the tree."

"You're exaggerating."

"Don'tâ€¦.don't ever do that again," he croaks, breath quickening under her tongue as the sensation starts to build nearly intolerably. "I'm...almostâ€¦"

She pulls up at the last second, staring him down with dilated eyes and smoothing a hand over him that's meant to be calming but comes across as anything but. The fact is, if she gets him off now, like she wants to, he'll likely out-argue her and they'll end up finishing this at home. She wants it here, and she needs him desperate.

"Not yet." His lips flap silently for a moment and her eyes wander, taking in the rucked up tee-shirt and that damn stopwatch resting against his chest. He's going to retort, they're going to end up at home and this is going to keep festering. "Mr. Haddock." She purrs and grins at him, hoping for winning and ending up somewhere closer to an excited grimace.

"You-we-what?" He stares at her hand wrapped around him and gulps and she pulls it back to rest on his thigh, looking at him hopefully.

"You were driving me crazy," she admits with an almost embarrassed shrug and he looks at her like he's worried about her brain.

"I was whining."

"You had that damn stopwatch," she explains, touching the side of the plactic before letting her hand dive back underneath his tee-shirt and circle his nipple with a gentle fingertip. "And your clothes are all so easy access." He looks unconvinced. "And we never got to finish with you ordering me around in the car, and it's been driving me crazy for weeks," she finally admits the whole reason and he grins. She has to notice that he doesn't look for cars, and it's a strange sort of validation.

"The stopwatch, huh?" He sits up a little straighter, brushing her hair behind her ear with an almost inappropriately soft finger. "Did it erm...always work that way?"

"It always drove me crazy," she admits, nuzzling her nose against the side of his face and kissing his cheek. "But in a different way," she bites his earlobe, wondering just how much she has to prod him to flick the magic switch. She can still hear him in the back of her mind, telling her to take her clothes off, all that confidence directed at her for her. She pulls back enough to look at him, and he's eyeing her strangely, a little perplexed behind the churning cogs. "But today, it was just plain authoritative."

"Finish-finish what you were doing," he starts soft and ends up commanding, gesturing towards his still damp shaft with his chin.

"But-"

"Finish me off, I don't want to rush this."

There it is. That mischievous glint in his eye. She smiles at him and ducks back down, slipping him back past her lips and bobbing her head. He bucks up into her mouth and groans, fingers tangling in her ponytail and glancing against the back of her scalp.

He even tastes like early season races, that brash out of the gate confidence mixed with underlying nerves, and she moans around him, sputtering slightly when he bucks upwards a little too hard. He mumbles an apology and she plants her hand against his hip before speeding up, holding her breath to keep going deeper.

His hand suddenly clenches in her ponytail, grip sporadic and almost rough as he splashes against the inside of her cheek, salty and masculine and Hiccup. She swallows it carefully and cleans up an errant drip with her tongue, stopping for a moment to tease the head of him even as he softens. His whole body twitches and he lets go of her hair, hand lingering against her shoulder until she sits back up, grinning at him expectantly. "Can I breathe for a minute?"

"I thought you were gearing up to take your time," she runs a delicate fingertip across his exposed upper thigh and he twitches, back of his head heavy on the headrest.

"Then take your shorts off," he tries again, smirk turning back up to something appealing. Astrid listens without saying anything, bare legs sticking slightly to the leather edge of the seat. "Underwear too."

"I thought you were going to take your time."

"Astrid?" He asks, voice deepening slightly as he looks at her, eyes sticking on the curve of her outer thigh. "Take off your underwear."

There we go. She's grinning like a madwoman as she peels the black cotton off of her legs and throws it flippantly into the backseat, leaving her knee brace on. Just in case she needs the support.

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He's staring at her like she's something edible, and it makes all the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. His hand lands in her thigh and inches its way up, ghosting almost close enough to the crease to be something before sliding up to unzip her warm up jacket. It's a new sports bra underneath, not pressing everything down as much as she's used to and he seems to appreciate it, eyes widening slightly at the cramped cleavage bulging against the top seams.

"Are you just going to stare?" Astrid asks in a voice not quite her own, legs spreading slightly against the seat. No one has driven by, and she doesn't think she'd care if they did. They probably couldn't even tell in passing what's going on, they're in their proper seats, mostly clothed from the waist up. She wants to rock the car and make

it obvious.

"Areâ€"Can I seriouslyâ€" He inhales deeply and looks at her beseechingly, and she nods, urging him forward. It must have been easier to stay into his domineering mode with the thrill of victory still pulsing through his veins and she bears with him. "Touch yourself," he orders, eyes fixed on hers, voice shaky but determined, absolutely irresistible.

"You wantâ€" she exhales quietly, taken aback but turned on as her heart starts to pound in earnest, flickering in a dimple right below her collar bone. "Like this?" She teases, sliding a shaky hand up the center of her stomach and brushing her fingertips against the thick elastic band of her sports bra. His eyes darken and he shakes his head, reaching out and grabbing her wrist, dragging her hand back down and pressing her fingers between her legs.

"You know what I mean."

"You want to watch?" Her fingers start moving in a slow obedient circle and he nods slowly.

"I just want to watch you get worked up," he's a little louder, a little more confident as his hand grips his own shaft and starts to pump slowly in the residual moisture left from her mouth. She stares at the motion and moans quietly, leaning back against the seat and spreading her legs enough to slide a finger inside of herself, using the moisture to rub her clit with slow, circular strokes. "And then you're going to get a condom out of the gloveboxâ€"

"I don't care," she shakes her head. "I haven't missed this month and I want to feel you."

"It feels better for you too, huh?" She bites her lip and nods, sighing and rubbing a little harder, a little faster. He moans when her eyes flicker shut and she jerks them open, staring at his hand moving in long smooth strokes. "Why? What feels better about it?"

This is new. Sure, they've said all manner of things by this point, in bed and out of it, but he's never made her talk before. It's always been sweet, instructional, seductive but never instrumental. Never the second act, always tacked on like an introduction or conclusion.

"It's so much warmer," she starts and he moans in quiet agreement, "and I can really feel you. I don't like something being be-between us." She stutters lightly, hand picking up speed as her hips start to rock slowly up into the motion. "Can I come over there? Please?"

"Why?" And his eyes are locked on hers, so green and warm no matter how much he's nagging her forward.

"Iâ€"I need you."

"Come here," he moans and pushes his pants down a bit farther and opening his arms. She climbs over the console and falters in the same position as they got stuck in last time, anchoring her hands on his shoulders and trying to shift into place.

"Lay your seat back?" She suggests, moaning as he slips two long fingers into her and tests out the dampness, fiddling just until she whimpers before pulling back and listening to her suggestion.

"Maybe if youâ€¦" he grabs the back of her thighs and tugs her closer, and alarm bells chime in her brain when her right knee bends deeper than he's seen in weeks. "Does that hurt?"

"Noâ€¦" she tests the angle, hissing when she bends deep enough to brush against him, so close to meeting him fully. "No! It doesn't hurt at all!"

"That's greaâ€¦aah!" He yelps as she sits down on him almost too quickly, a punch to the gut at the same time as a pleasant warm sleeve around everything sensitive. And she feels so much better without the barrier, sweet and slippery and warm, clutching at him on every stroke almost too tightly. She's bouncing on him, hands anchored on his shoulders as her legs pump her up and down, clenching and strong. "Easy there, thatâ€¦" he groans, "almost hurts."

"My knee bends! It bends!" She moans, and grinds forward on top of him tucking her lips into his neck and biting the skin below his ear, sucking until he squeaks and bucks up into her. The chair creaks ominously, but Astrid can't really spare a second, she's too thrilled about the joint's smooth movement.

God, it feels fantastic, free and strong and healthier than it's been in months, healthier than it used to after long races. And she can feel it stretch and grip, working like it's supposed to in between muscles that feel capable and sore after that day's work out.

"Ouch! Oh yeahâ€¦oh no," Hiccup can't seem to decide if he likes the attention or not, the metal bar of the seat's reclined upright digging into his lower back with every vigorous bounce. But she's so tight and warm and wet and _enthusiastic_ that it starts to overload anyway, his toes fading to frantic static.

"It doesn't even hurt," she laughs, leaning down flush against his chest and grinding forward with a loud groan. At this angle, she starts to remember the initial pleasure that led her to this. "God, you feel so good," she groans into his neck and he squirms, arching off of the seat and bucking into her.

"Not gonna last," he warns, fingernails digging into her lower back just enough to sting. She moans louder and her movements start to fall apart, no longer rhythmic so much as desperate.

"Meâ€¦me either," his eyes lock onto hers and it hits her, muscles seizing as she moans his name and shoves the heels of her hands into his shoulders. He stiffens under her the same instant that the seat cracks, splitting at the hinge and sending them headfirst into the backseat of the car.

Foam dust fills the air around them and Hiccup groans, slipping out of her with a wet squelch and reaching up to rub the back of his head before touching his lower back.

"Get. Off." He spits through gritted teeth, eyes squinted shut in pain and she scoots back to kneel on either side of his legs before

grabbing his hand and helping him sit up. The seat is completely dismembered, split in two like a roughly treated hot dog bun.

"Are you ok?" She checks, running her fingers through the back of his hair and finding a robin's egg blooming on his scalp. "It's not bleeding."

"Back is worse," he winces as she slips her hand underneath his shirt and feels the football sized, warm patch on his lower back, already swelling around a long and thin raised scrape. She looks at her finger and hides an embarrassed wince.

"Back is bleeding a little bit, not bad though." She kisses the top of his head and is utterly shocked to hear him snicker.

"That wasâ€¦that was awesome."

"You're bleeding," she laughs too, sitting down on his knees and staring at her brace straining slightly against the skin of her thigh. "But _this_ was pretty great."

"Your knee?" He laughs again, wincing and pushing her hair out of her face. "I thought you were a little _involved_ with your knee there."

"It was exciting," she peeks over his shoulder and inches up the shirt to look at the spot, glad he can't see her expression. "That's one hell of a rug-burn you have there."

"Yeah, can you drive home?" He laughs again, patting her thighs.

"Can I drive home?" She looks at the seat, carefully climbing off of his lap and wiggling back into her shorts. "With the seat like that?"

"Uh, if you don't mind sitting in a half-crunch the entire way." He cringes and accepts her hand on his arm as he tugs his pants back up. "It is sort of your fault anyway. Almost killing me _twice_ in the last half hour."

"I'll drive," she rolls her eyes and switches seats with him.

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**Poor Hiccup's car. That thing is getting so much damn abuse. It needs a nice weekend at the body shop for a detailing. **

**And I know that the next chapter is up now, but I'd really appreciate hearing your thoughts on this one! Thank you! **

23. Chapter 23

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"When is everyone else going to be here?" Ruff asks, bored on Astrid's bed as she folds a pile of laundry, stacking clothes into her dresser.

"I said two, and it's one thirty," Astrid checks her watch, once again sitting on a pale strip of skin surrounded by tan.

"Why did you tell me one?"

"Because Hiccup wanted to show Fishlegs something, and they would have missed it," Astrid explains simply, frowning at the large pile of clothes still untouched on the bed. "You could help me, you know."

"I could, but I haven't even folded my own laundry in months," Ruff sighs lazily from her reclined position before sitting up with an overdramatic grunt and picking up a tee-shirt. "But it's better than watching you fold. I guess."

"Thank you," Astrid rolls her eyes, opening her closet door and setting about finding empty hangers. Ruff stares at the folded shirt in her hands for a minute before sighing and bending to open a random drawer in Astrid's dresser, frowning at its contents.

"Why is this drawer full of pictures?" She sets the folded clothes onto the bed beside her and picks up the stack of photos, flicking through them.

"Huh?" Astrid looks at the drawer for a minute before recognizing her not so hidden hiding place. "Oh, I put those away a while ago." She shrugs and turns back to her closet, too attuned to the light papery noise of Ruff sifting through the stack.

"Hey! Why did you put this one away? I'm in it," the girl holds up a picture of them in the car. Astrid was wearing a CU Track tee-shirt, and she can see why it got swept away in her purge.

"Because you're so important."

"I have pictures of you in my room," Ruff actually sounds hurt and Astrid chokes back a laugh. "I'm going to go take them down and hide them in a drawer. That's what you get forâ€"

"Pick somewhere," Astrid cuts her friend off and gestures to her still mostly empty bulletin board on the wall. "Put it up. Go crazy."

"Why was it hidden in the first place?" Ruff asks, less peeved as she pins the picture nearly dead center, next to a picture of Spike and Toothless smiling in the yard.

"Iâ€|spring cleaning," Astrid snips, shrugging curtly. "Go ahead, put them all up."

"You spring cleaned my picture from your wall?" Ruff still sounds offended, sighing relieved when she finds the next picture. "Oh, this one has Hiccup in it. You spring cleaned him too, I feel betterâ€|Why did you spring clean Hiccup?" Ruff asks after a moment, waving the picture towards Astrid. "And this is a horrible picture of him, by the way. He looks constipated."

"Hey," Astrid joins her, snatching the picture out of her hands. "I like this picture." She glances down at the image to affirm that she

likes it, smiling automatically. "This was at Worlds' Trials. He looks like that because my leg is bleeding."

"Baby," Ruff laughs, looking at the picture again and grinning at the crimson stain running down the back of Astrid's calf. "Oh yeah, I remember you bled all over the track or something. Awesome."

"It was pretty awesome, these guys had to go bleach the track before the 10k," Astrid shrugs, trying not to brag, but Ruff still looks sufficiently jealous.

"Why did you take all of these down?" A couple of awards are in with the pictures, crisp tan paper embossed with fancy gold lettering.

"Theyâ€" Astrid sighs and shrugs, and lying to keep this secret feels stupid. "It was hard to look at them when I was on bed rest. Everything in this room had something to do with running, you know?"

"Let's put it all back up," Ruff suggests, jostling her shoulder with a too rough elbow. "Fishlegs says I have an eye for decorating."

"I'm pretty sure he just wanted you moving in to include sex," Astrid rolls her eyes and accepts half of the pictures, hanging one of the frames from a still exposed nail in the wall. "How is that going by the way?"

"It's alright. I'm already used to his stinky feet so that wasn't a surprise," Ruff's smile is uncharacteristically soft, almost sweet. "We need a bigger place though, I swear when he stands in the living room, he takes up all the space."

"Well, you can afford it with your adult job, right?" Astrid teases, returning the elbow. Ruff got a job at an office selling sports equipment after graduation. She's never hated anything more.

"Don't leave school, Astrid. Ever. The real world is boring."

"I've got a few more years," Astrid shrugs, hiding the fact that she's jealous of Ruff and Fishlegs. Living together, only them, making all those decisions with each other instead of just hoping that their decisions don't pull them apart. Hiccup is graduating with his Masters a year before her, and he doesn't even know if he'll get a job in the state, let alone in the area.

"Enjoy them. Still invite me to parties, even if I look like an old desperate woman."

"I doubt I'm going to be having that many parties," Astrid rolls her eyes, pinning a picture of her and Hiccup at a late season high school track meet that she doesn't remember. They look happy in that carefree way that's reserved for high school seniors who are so excited to be adults but don't know what that entails. "Grad school is probably going to be harder."

"For you?" Ruff laughs, turning to Astrid and frowning before looking around the room. "You took down your metals too? No way. Those are going back up."

"They're in my closet, somewhere. Shoe box on the floor," Astrid gestures for Ruff to grab them, blushing when she finds a pair of Hiccup's boxers first.

"Nice."

"Oh shut upâ€" "

"These are pretty far from the bed, seems like someone _threw_ themâ€" "

"Medals? Remember you were in there looking for medals?" Astrid snaps, picking up the boxers and tossing them into her empty hamper.

"Right. That does make this a better hiding place though, _behind_ the dirty underwear. And I mean _dirty_ _underwear." She shuts up before Astrid can make her, rummaging for a minute before pulling out a white, heavy box. "This one?"

"Yeah, that's the one." Astrid sits down on the bed and Ruff joins her, box half on both of their laps. The cardboard says Saucony on the side and she braces herself to see the lonely spikes and flats inside even more than the medals. It doesn't seem fair that she abandoned her shoes, not after everything they went through together. She's had those flats longer than she's been with Hiccup, no matter how many CU pairs she had, she always went back to those old staples.

Ruff peels back the lid and whistles, "there's a lot of metal in here," she pulls out the first gold medal she sees, draping it around her neck and looking down at it with a grin. "I could get used to this," she sticks her chest out proudly, medal solid and shiny even through its layer of dust.

"Well, don't. They are still my medals." Astrid grabs an indiscriminate handful and puts them on, a gold, two silvers, and a bronze hanging from her neck.

"Which one is the sexy-time medal?" Ruff asks, pulling the rest out and splaying them on the bed.

"Sexy-time medal?"

"You know," Ruff laughs, face red as she recalls the event. "You left your phone with me while you were racing and Hiccup texted that he was excited to see you in only the medal once you won? And you did win, it should be one of these gold-colored ones."

"Oh my god, I remember that," Astrid blushes and covers her cheeks with a hand. "And you told him that you'd relay the message. He wasâ€" That was horrible."

"That was hilarious," Ruff corrects, sorting the gold colored awards out of the stack and filtering through them. "So which one is it. I have half a mind to get naked and wear it out to the garage."

"No," Astrid shakes her head. "You will not pollute that memory for me. Nope. Not one that you get to ruin."

"So it was good?" Ruff winks, picking up a smaller gold and reading the title. "It was at home, so it's not this one. It'll say CU on it."

"Here," Astrid spies it out of the corner of her eye, handing it over but balking before Ruff takes it and pulling it over her head. "Actually no, you don't get to wear this one."

"_That_ good then, go Hiccup!" She hoots and pulls another medal from the stack. "Wait a second, where are the trophies? Didn't you used to have a bunch of trophies?"

"Eh?" Astrid shrugs, "a lot of them are in the attic. I didn't really have shelf space" "Ouch." She glares and rubs her arm where Ruff punched her.

"Sometimes I don't know why we're friends. 'I don't have shelves for all my trophies.' Just ask, Fishlegs will build you a shelf. Hell, I bet Hiccup would build you a shelf, but it wouldn't be half as nice," Ruff brags and Astrid rolls her eyes.

"I like the medals more anyway. All the trophies look the same, because the NCAA only uses one trophy supply. The medals are all different," she leans a little closer and shows off the CU etched into her new favorite medal. She might start wearing this one like jewelry.

And instead of clothes.

They sift through them for a few more minutes, detangling some hopelessly snarled straps and laying them out on the bed in order of which are coolest. Naturally, the comparatively huge and heavy gold from Worlds is first and deserving of its own hook. Just as they're arguing over whether they should be hung by color or size, Hiccup and Fishlegs peek their heads around the corner, smiling at the semi-organized chaos of unfolded laundry and shiny medallions in neat rows.

Toothless and Spike squeeze through the doorway and sniff at the edge of the bed, months old dust apparently interesting. Ruff leans over and pats the wolf's head as Spike walks around to lean against Astrid's legs.

"What are you guys doing?" Hiccup asks, and Astrid can smell the abrasive orange soap he uses to strip oil from his hands from ten feet away. She can't help but think about how soft it always makes his hands and the metal resting against her chest, warming in the well of her breasts.

"The gimp put away all her cool shit back when she was gimpy," Ruff says simply, earning another eye roll from Astrid. "We're putting it back up."

"Hiccup?" Astrid asks sweetly enough to make him nervous, gesturing to the sorted rows beside her. "These should be sorted by size, shouldn't they? Because it's bigger medals for bigger meets, and a bronze at nationals matters more than gold at a _scrimmage_." She spits the word at Ruff as if it proves her point.

"Don't get involved," Fishlegs advises Hiccup, whisper not quite quiet enough.

"Obviously, they should be sorted by color," Ruff proposes to Fishlegs in a similarly sweet tone. "Because then the gold pile dwarfs the bronze pile and Astrid looks like a badass."

"Do you have my favorite?" Hiccup asks, ignoring the question entirely and stepping closer to thumb through the bronzes.

"She's wearing your favorite," Ruff grins wolfishly, gesturing to the small gold resting on Astrid's chest. "She won't let me wear it. I was going to get naked too, for that 'only the medal' experience"

"You still remember that?" Hiccup cringes, face blushing crimson. "That was two years ago, don't you have better things to tease me about now?"

"Well, I can't use 'you punch like a girl'," Hiccup's flush deepens, sliding down his neck to disappear in the collar of his shirt. "So I'm going to stick with the dirty text."

"Here," Astrid cuts them off, peeling a larger bronze from around her neck. "This one is your favorite, right? The one from Iowa?"

"Yes," he takes it and smiles, remembering the wonderful time when Astrid ditched out on the bus and they drove out to her meet with Toothless and Spike in the backseat. It was fun even though he had to deal with Astrid camping the night after a race, whining all night about how sore she was and how she'd kill for a bed. "Can I keep this one in my room?"

"Sure," she smiles obligingly, laughing as he places it around his neck. "Looks good."

"Oh no, Fish, we better get out of here," Ruff teases, jingling with hardware as she crosses the room to grab Fishlegs' hand. "They're wearing medals, that's foreplay if I've ever seen any."

"Shut up, Ruff," Astrid glares at her friend, accepting Hiccup's hand and allowing him to help her up. "Is anyone else here yet?" Astrid asks, looking towards the doorway and following Hiccup into the hallway, hands still loosely intertwined and hanging between them.

"No," he shakes his head, squeezing her fingers. "But it's barely two, this thing isn't supposed to play until 2:30. It's just Scott and Tuff, right? Oh, and Thuggory, he just said he's at the bottom of the hill," He double checks, glancing down self consciously at the medal on his chest.

"Yeah, Josie couldn't get a flight, but I'm sure I'll get a call," Astrid rolls her eyes, "And Jenny has a race this weekend in Charleston."

"You'll be racing soon," He reminds her simply and she nods, looking down at summer browned knees, scar still cutting across her skin ruddy and ridged.

"I will," she nods.

"Because you have to keep winning medals," he glances at the smallest gold on her chest under the ridiculous amount of metal. It's closest to her skin, surrounded by wrinkled cotton, and he wonders if that's on purpose. "So we can keep Ruff clip full of things to tease me about."

"Teasing is how she shows affection."

"Oh no, Ruff has affection for me. Do you think she'd find me in my dad's closet?" He laughs, looking towards the staircase with an affected fearful expression.

"Don't let her get you in a closet, that's when it really gets dangerous," Astrid jokes, nudging him in the ribs with her elbow. Before he can actually go find a better hiding place, the doorbell rings and Astrid detaches her hand from his to go answer it. Thuggory pushes past her with a grin, falling to the floor and wrestling Spike, leaving a huge, slobbery kiss on her belly.

"Thanks for coming," Hiccup laughs as Spike squirms blissfully, planting big front paws on Thuggory's head and pushing while Toothless bows into play pose beside them, looking to get in on the fun. "Otherwise I would have been stuck with all these losers from high school."

Ruff throws a medal, bronze thankfully, at Hiccup and hits him in the lower back. He picks it up and glares at her, pulling it over his head as if to keep it safe from a naughty child.

"Whoa, where did you guys get the medals?" Thuggory stands, scratching both dogs' backs and moving towards Astrid to examine the wreath of metal around her neck.

"They're mine, I'm hanging them back up," Astrid shrugs, peeling a gold from around her neck and draping it around Hiccup's. "You need some color."

"Well, thank you," he kisses the top of her head, chest puffing out a little under the weight.

"Want a silver too?" She offers, fingering one of the three that she ended up with. "Because I have extra silver."

"I'm good. I'm more of a warm colors guy anyway," he jokes, earning a somehow rewarding scoff.

"I want a medal," Thuggory pouts, looking enviously at Astrid. "I've never won a medal, we just do trophies."

"Well, you're a silver today, Thugs," Astrid steps forward, setting the silver she'd been willing to give Hiccup around his neck. "Second place just for showing up."

"Who got first place?" He asks, looking enviously at a larger gold around Ruff's neck.

"Hiccup."

"He lives here, he doesn't even have to try to show up," he whines and Ruff snickers, adorning Fishlegs with a large silver. Astrid glares at him, but the gesture is cut off when the doorbell rings again and she goes to answer it, opening the door.

Scott Nout's shoulders take up most of the doorway, but Tuff peeks over his shoulder, showing an obscene gesture to his sister around Scott's hips. Ruff returns the insult vocally and Astrid can practically hear Fishlegs shaking his head, lovingly accepting.

"Hey," Scott greets, initially broad smile faltering slightly. She frowns at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Happy to see you?" Astrid steps aside to let him come in, fully expecting him to not so accidentally brush a hand over her. He avoids her entirely, shrinking through the doorway and stepping too quickly into the room. Tuff saunters in after him, snickering about something.

"I am happy to see you, Astrid."

"I see you still haven't gotten that tooth veneered," she runs her tongue over her top teeth and stops on the one that mirrors Tuff's conspicuous gap. "Good to see you, Tuff." She follows them into the busy living room, sitting on the floor in front of the couch and leaning back against the arm, as Hiccup is sandwiched almost comically between Scott and Tuff. Ruff is sitting similarly in front of the recliner, leaning back against Fishlegs' shins and Thuggory is seated on the floor, one arm around Spike while her tail thumps in Astrid's direction. Toothless is alone in the dog bed, sprawled and comfortable, already wheezing quietly.

"What's with all the medals?" Tuff asks, looking around the room at the other five people, hint of jealousy in his voice.

"Going through Astrid's stuff," Ruff shrugs, leaning her head back against Fish's knees and fingering the metal on her chest. "She has like, a hundred of these things."

"Well, they hand them out at every meet," Astrid looks at one of the less convincing ones around her neck, an aluminum circle spray painted shiny gold. "I accumulated a lot."

"I want to wear a medal," Tuff complains, leaning towards his sister. She brings up Fishlegs's arm as a shield, crouching further into her cozy spot.

"Quick! Astrid, Tuff as the man out," she calls hyper-dramatically and Astrid laughs, pushing to her feet and peeling the shoddy gold off of her neck, setting to drape it over Scott's head. He lurches back against the couch, eyes wide and alarmed as he dodges her hands.

"What? It's even gold," she laughs, mostly at Hiccup squirming away from Scott's broad shoulder.

"Justâ€¦don't um," he reaches up with a huge hand, barely touching her wrist with two fingers and nudging her hand away. "Hi."

"Hey, Scott," Astrid shakes her head and offers him the medal.

"It's ESPN, right?" Hiccup asks her, trying to abate the awkward tension by picking up the remote and turning on the TV. "What channel is that again?" The whole room groans in unison and Astrid requests the remote with an open hand, reaching across Scott's chest, further confused when he shrinks slightly away from her touch. Last time she saw him he hugged her goodbye for five minutes.

She gets the remote and changes the channel as she sits down back against the arm of the couch. There's two minutes left on the pregame clock with a few ex-players talking about baseball, and the clock makes her whole chest clench powerfully. A big game starts right after the next commercial break and they're assuming everyone will catch the commercial break before it. They're probably right.

"Probably the next commercial," Astrid nods, suddenly nervous. She hasn't seen a final cut and it starts to sink in that she might hate it. She doesn't hate the check sitting fat and happy accruing interest in her bank account, but she might hate what this does to her reputation.

"I'm so excited," Ruff admits, pretending to bite the edge of a gold medal and earning a glare from Astrid. "What? You expect me to resist? I've never had a huge gold coin before."

"You know that the Worlds one is the only one with actual gold in it," Astrid rolls her eyes. "That's justâ€¦something shiny and yellow."

"Probably a gold aluminum alloy," Fishlegs interjects helpfully and Tuff scoffs. Ruff reaches back and pinches his shin until he squawks and yanks it away from her, parting with a few leg hairs. "Or spray paint."

It's strange seeing everyone together like this, out of college and so far along with their lives. Tuff is skinnier, it seems, without football, and his hair has grown back to his shoulders since the dreadlock incident. Scott is bigger than ever, broad shoulders and tiny waist like a superman action figure, thick curly hair still falling down over his forehead in ringlets. Thuggory, sitting with their group like he belongs, jockey enough that Hiccup is still the odd man out with his pale skin and long lean arms. Ruff and Fish look the same, but that could be because Astrid sees them so often, she hasn't really had the chance to notice them aging.

Hiccup looks different, probably not actually, he likely looks exactly the same to everyone else. Skinny arms, skinny body, skinny one and a half legs. But she can see the thick shadow of yesterday's shave on his jaw, less red than it was five years ago, and no matter what anyone says, he has filled out, shoulders broadening above a narrow waist. But mostly, she used to look at his eyes and be confused about how she felt, confused about how much seemed to radiate out of the emerald circles and ensnare her. Now she sees an impossible them, thrown together from strange parts and dog kisses and fights and busy weeks broken up with lazy mornings. The completely separate entity of their relationship, grown and matured and still wildly unexplored, more interesting and lovable than Scott's mightiest bicep flexes.

He catches her looking and smiles, crooked and almost shy. He's nervous about the commercial too, and she nods, returning the grin until he looks confident again.

"So Scott, no graduation party?" Astrid asks after a minute, more curious to see his reaction than actually have an answer to the question.

"No," he answers curtly, scooting his feet away from her and looking downright tragic. "I—I would have invited you, it's just—I haven't felt too much like partying lately."

"What?" Astrid sits forward, shooting Hiccup a look that lets him read her confused mind. "No partying for you?"

"I've been busy with life," he shrugs, looking back to the TV. "Oh, hey, commercials." It's a dumb comment to throw Astrid's somehow unwanted attention, but it's exciting enough that she listens, stomach heavy and nervous as she turns to face the screen. She can feel Hiccup's eyes boring into the back of her head, confused and nervous energy radiating off of him like a silent conversation.

It's the second commercial to come on, starting with a black screen and a self-important announcement about a word from sponsors. The black screen cuts to a compilation of scenes where Astrid bursts through a ribbon. They almost seem familiar, but it's like watching a good friend or something she dreamed. Some of them are from high school, going as far back as her first triumphant Berk Bolt as a freshman and she feels like the entire world just saw her baby pictures.

'This used to be me,' the voiceover starts, and Astrid resists the urge to blurt out asking if she actually sounds like that. 'Running was my life.' A dramatic booming noise and the screen goes temporarily black before a picture of two legs, hers, faking injured for the picture, framed between two crutches and one supported with a familiar clunky knee brace. 'Then I fell, and they told me I'd never run again.'

Exaggeration. Of course they use the exaggeration.

'But I had a secret weapon,' the music builds to something inspiring and sweet in the background and there are Hiccup's feet next to the crutches, Hiccup's actual feet. 'I had Henry.'

'We met in high school, but I wouldn't say we were the best of friends. Then, I met his dog, Toothless,' the wolf's feet appear beside theirs, shiny front prosthetic at home in the strange frame. His tail wags slowly back and forth and he leans into Hiccup. 'That was before the accident,' a news article with a too young Henry on the front page, smiling reluctantly through thick braces, 'he lost his leg in an accident, and I was there for that too,' Astrid in the hospital with him, a picture she didn't know about that she'll have to kill Hiccup's dad for later, her forehead on the mattress with his bone thin hand in hers. 'And somewhere between going home and learning how to walk again, we became _us_.'

And a prom picture, sickly sweet and dazzling, Hiccup in his tux while she stands smiling on his arm, high school excited.

'We've been together for four and a half years and counting, and even though we go to different schools, we were closer than ever when I learned about my knee. Henry knew I'd run again, he believed in me when no one else did, dealt with me when I was loopy on anesthesia and when I refused to take pain pills and sat around wincing. Henry was there, just like he always has been.' There's some footage of her laughing at the side of the track, the day of filming when she hadn't realized they were watching, hand on Hiccup's shoulder. 'It was hard, when I started walking and nothing moved quite like it should, but Henry kept me trying, he kept me on my feet even when I didn't want to be,' Astrid bites her lip, very suddenly realizing that Hiccup hasn't heard any of this and wondering what he thinks. 'And we probably fell even more in love.'

'When I was winning worlds,' it sounds so conceited, and seems like it with all of the sickly sweet shots of her and Hiccup, 'I never thought I'd need a crutch, but suddenly I was leaning on him, trying to figure out a way to run again. And that's where Nike Recovery came in,' they finally show the shoe, red and white and much cleaner than her muddy pair by the door, and the whole room exhales, Ruff and Tuff snickering about something relayed only through twin telepathy. 'Nike Recovery has a patent pending new supporting foam technology coupled with durability and speed that allows athletes of all ages get back into shape after knee and ankle injuries. Nike Recovery training shoes kept my step straight and my knee stable as I started walking further and even jogging again. It's only been a week, but it's going great.'

The camera pans out to show the track, and Hiccup standing next to it with his stopwatch, focus lingering a millisecond too long on his foot before zooming in on his face. She walks over to him from the hill, nodding at him before taking her place on the starting line, Nike checkmark unbelievably visible on her new lightweight knee brace. Then again, she doesn't mind so much, considering she has three free braces in a drawer down the hall. They zoom in a little too far on her face, dramatic music building as she can't help but think that this is all making her look too pretty and not athletic enough.

Hiccup says go, nasal and blissfully unedited, and she takes off, sound of clay gravel crunching magnified to stand beside the happy music in the background. She's crazy if they don't zoom in on her ass as she pulls away from the camera, and her face goes red, hoping it was subtle enough that only she noticed. Something warm about the timber of Hiccup's eyes on the back of her neck tells her that he noticed.

Then again, he could just be remembering that those shorts are in her room, and that she's wearing that medal around her neck. She shakes off the image, because their friends are here, and this is not the time.

She watches her own gait as she runs around the far side of the track, not quite Astrid Hofferson, but something close. A good approximation bound to get better with time.

'And I know I'll be racing soon, because just like Henry's leg can't keep him down, my knee can't hold me back,' and it's so treacle. Ugh. 'Because I am Recovery.'

The screen goes black, a single red checkmark with the slogan 'Just do it' underneath. The room is absolutely silent.

"That wasâ€¦completely sappy," Ruff comments after a quiet moment and Thuggory snorts, offering her his closed fist, which she bumps. That's a dangerous friendship right there.

"Right? You being all sweet to Hiccup? Ugh," Tuff shivers, louder to make up for the fact that his twin is celebrating with someone other than him.

"It isâ€¦unexpected," Scott adds, eyes wistful and empty towards a corner of the room as the dusty, slow cogs of his mind lurch into motion. "Iâ€¦Hiccup. Can I talk to you for a second?" he looks meaningfully at Astrid and stands. She happily scoots behind him and takes his place on the couch, confused and laughing as he jumps away.

"Sure, Scott, you can talk to me," Hiccup looks at the other boy strangely, hand falling easily around Astrid's shoulders and pulling her into his side. Scott looks oddly overjoyed and Hiccup's arm clamps down on her, nervous as to the meaning of Scott's expression.

"Alone," Scott adds, leaning forward and almost hissing the word.

"Why can't you just say it here?" Hiccup asks, thumb stroking Astrid's arm just below the sleeve of her tee-shirt. Scott's eyes widen further.

"Because it'sâ€¦Dude, just come with me, I can help you," Scott offers, gesturing towards the kitchen with a flick of his head.

"I don't think I need any help?" It comes out as a question and Astrid leans back harder against his side, ridges of her spine warm and familiar against his ribs.

"Dude," he says urgently, looking meaningfully at Astrid. "Justâ€¦just come with me."

"I think I'll stay here," Hiccup laughs lightly, looking around and trying to tell if he's the only one confused by the situation.

"Alright," Thuggory stands, Spike lurching to her feet and wagging around his ankles. "I'll bite, what do you have to say to Hiccup?" Scott looks at the boy and edges closer, faltering when he looks down at Astrid's knee, a few inches from him.

"Fine," Scott gives in, gesturing towards the kitchen. Thuggory smiles, grinning back at the room on the way.

Ruff pauses for a minute, shooting Astrid a devious look before following the two boys on tip toes, lurking by the side of the doorway and resting her head against the wall. She listens for a second before clapping a hand over her mouth and catching a laugh, eyes squinted tightly shut.

"Why does this make me nervous?" Hiccup asks after a moment, hand cupping the point of Astrid's shoulder and holding her tighter against him. His lips brush the shell of her ear as Ruff laughs again, foot silently stomping towards the ground as she tries to maintain secrecy. "Because this is making me really nervous."

"What?" She mutters, not caring if Tuff overhears. "He hasn't hit on me at all today. It's strange."

"I like that part," he plants a kiss against the top of her ear. "But this isâ€¦weird, Scott never tries to talk to me."

"Thuggory will tell you what's up."

The commercial comes on again in the background, already overplayed by the next break and Astrid flicks off the TV, rolling her eyes. She's already sick of her own voice. She's finally comfortable, relaxed into Hiccup's side, when her phone buzzes in her pocket and Josie's name shows up on the caller ID.

"Do you have to get it?" He asks, nose pushed almost too sweetly for present company into the back of her hair.

"She'll keep calling if I don't, I'll be right back," Astrid stands, pausing to kiss the top of his head before walking back towards the hallway to pick up the phone. Tuff looks at Hiccup like he's an interesting artifact, staring at the place Astrid kissed like it's about to catch on fire. Hiccup shrugs off the attention, glaring at Tuff and making that face that means he's sure he's the only sane guy in the room.

He's probably right.

Josie's voice blares out of the phone as soon as Astrid holds it to her ear, laughing raucously. "Andâ€¦oh GOD, and the wolf was in it. That was the best part, the wolf's little metal p-p-pawâ€¦" she slips back into the desperate laughter, and a thud echoes through the line. "I fell. It's so funny that I fell. And I even waited to call you so that I could stop laughing, but it's justâ€¦And they combed Henry's hair? He looked so normal," it sounds like she must be laughing into a pillow to muffle the noise.

"Are you done yet?"

"I don't think I'll ever be done. This isâ€¦this is the best thing sinceâ€¦sinceâ€¦ever. This is the best thing ever!" Josie coughs, wheezing through another bout of giggles.

"I'm going to hang up."

"Henryâ€¦Henry's voice? It was so intense!" She snickers, voice calming slightly, "oh my god, I thought I was going to puke, it was so funny."

"You should see my bank account," Astrid snips a bit defensively. "It's not funny."

"Theâ€¦with theâ€¦I'm out. I'll think of more, but I'm out," Josie admits, and Astrid assumes that the clatter is her climbing back onto

the bed. "Did you think it was going to look like that?"

"I didn't know. It was a littleâ€|sappier than I expected. But I did the recording, I knew what I was saying."

"It was hilarious. I'm recording it the next time it comes on. I'm going to come play it at your funeral." Josie insists. "Everyone will all be crying about you being dead, and then I can play that thingâ€|"

"Ok, ok, I'll leave you to your revenge planning in peace. I've got to go tell Hiccup how funny his intense voice isâ€|" Josie cuts her off with a catcall and another thump that means she likely fell off of the bed again. "Ok, bye."

"Bye Astrid," she hangs up with one last laugh echoing through the receiver and Astrid heads back towards the living room, pausing by the kitchen and attempting eye contact with a silently guffawing Ruff. Scott is still talking and she leans closer to the doorway, catching the last half of a beseeching sentence.

"â€|I'm justâ€|I'm seeing something there. What if they could be something?" Scott asks Thuggory, who remains silent, if he's even still listening. "What if theyâ€|I know that they went to prom together, and thatâ€|I didn't want to see it fizzle, but she just loves me too much. Andâ€|If she would just give Hiccup a chanceâ€|"

"Don't try this, dude," Thuggory is smiling, it's obvious in his voice. "Henry doesn't need your help."

"Who's Henry?"

"Henry is Hiccup's actual nameâ€|" Thuggory explains slowly, consonants sticking to his teeth as he tries to dumb down his point. "Anyway, Scott, just let it be, alright?"

"I can't, I've got to get back out thereâ€|" Astrid takes her cue and tiptoes back to the couch, sitting back against Hiccup and dragging his arm over her shoulders and pretending she was there the whole time. Ruff follows, less gracefully sprawling back on the floor and wrapping her arms around Toothless's neck as he peeks curiously over the edge of the dog bed. Scott follows not far behind, taking in Astrid's position with too eager eyes.

"Hey Tuff," he starts, big feet faltering forward. "Can I have your seat, bro?"

"Why?" Tuff wrinkles his nose, looking at Thuggory who is sitting back down on the floor and rubbing Spike's ears. "Do you want me to sit on the floor?"

"Uh, sure," Scott stares at Tuff for a second before the male twin listens, sliding down onto the floor and kicking his sister in the foot. She glares at him and continues scratching Toothless's neck, like she's polishing a prized weapon.

Scott takes Tuff's place on the couch and looks at Hiccup carefully, leaning towards the smaller man conspiratorially.

"Hey Scott," Hiccup leans away, and Astrid can feel his accelerating heartbeat against her shoulder.

"Do you work out?"

"Erâ€|" Hiccup looks down at himself like someone told him he has a stain on his shirt. "No."

"You should. Build out the guns a little bit and you'd be a real stud," Scott thumps an open hand on Hiccup's shoulder and he flinches at the impact. "The ladies love it."

"I'm good, Scott," Hiccup tugs Astrid a little closer, nodding in the hopes of ending this conversation.

"Go for it dude, I think it might turn out different this time."

"Go for what?"

"Amâ€|"Am I the only one seeing the chemicals here?" Scott looks around the room, and no one bothers to correct his question.

"I can see it," Tuff agrees after a too long silence, grinning at his sister who whispers something menacing in Toothless's ear. The wolf doesn't attack and instead licks her face too sweetly for her to really be disappointed.

"Scott?" Astrid asks, hand falling to Hiccup's knee as she leans forward to look around him. His hand follows, absentmindedly stroking the cap of her shoulder and Scott's eyes darken with indignance. "What are you talking about?"

"This is how it's going to be, Astrid? You can't do this to a solid guy like Hiccup just because you can't let it go," he looks genuinely mad, standing with a brotherly hand on Hiccup's shoulder and gesturing to Tuff. "Give it a chance, people heal. We're adults now." Tuff stands beside his friend and glances over his shoulder at his sister.

"Dude, we should get out of here, the freak is trying to sick a wolf on me," he flips off his sister with a grimace and she laughs, Toothless kissing her cheek again fondly.

"If that commercial didn't show you the potion, Astrid, I don't think anything will," Scott looks genuinely disappointed in her as he walks towards the door, Tuff following closely.

"See you later, Scott," Astrid waves curtly, flinching as the door slams behind him and Spike squeaks in Thuggory's arms. "Thugs, what was that all about?"

"You two don't want to know," he looks back at Hiccup, nodding slowly. "It'sâ€|"he's your biggest fan, dude. Wouldn't worry about it."

"I'm still concerned that someone is supposed to show Astrid a potion," Ruff grimaces, laughing as Toothless licks her chin. "That sounds really dirty."

"Curious?" Astrid laughs, raising an eyebrow.

"Sort of curious," Ruff admits, hand on Toothless's neck as the wolf smiles at Hiccup, bragging about his pretty new pal. "Definitely curious."

"Let's just say that commercial really made him _think_," Thuggory nods slowly, looking at the blank TV screen.

"That'd be a first," Hiccup snarks, earning a fond punch on the arm from Astrid and a laugh from the rest of the room.

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**A whole chapter without smut. Wow, I didn't know that could still happen. And the Scott. **

**And I know the commercial is a little long for a typical commercialâ€|but I liked it. And so it stayed. And oh, the Scott. **

Don't forget to tell me what you thought of this one before heading forward! (Warning, Hiccup in scrubs. It happens.)

24. Chapter 24

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Astrid remembers when seven miles was easy. The sweltering heat can't be helping anything, but she still feels miserably out of shape as she limps down the hill to her car, lonely in the shimmering hot parking lot. All the smart people are at the parks with shade.

The inside of the car is worse, sticky and smelling like sun dried dog from all of Toothless's shedding in the backseat. The warm Gatorade on the front seat is better than nothing, and Astrid feels slightly more human as she pulls her phone out of the center console and dials Hiccup's number.

"Hello?" He picks up with an obvious yawn, and just the sound of his groggy voice makes her tired.

"Napping?"

"Little bit," he sits up with a squeak of leather and she hears a disgruntled Toothless slump to the floor. "Done with your run?"

"Yeah, do you mind checking if we have athletic tape? I don't remember if I used it all or not last time."

"Is your knee bugging you?"

"It's a little loose today," she runs a hand over the ruddy scar, barely turning flat and white around the edges. "I figure wrap it up, better safe than sorry."

"Music to my ears," he exalts dramatically and Astrid rolls her eyes. "And yes, we have tape."

"Thank you, see you in fifteen," she shuts the car door, sentencing herself to the car shaped oven.

"I'll help you when you get here," his voice sounds strange, too excited considering how recently she woke him up. He likes helping her with tape far too much, but she doesn't have the heart to say no.

Not after all that help she made him force on her.

"Ok, see you then." She hangs up, starting the car and pulling out of the parking lot, grimacing at the smell of baked rubber when her tires roll onto scalding asphalt. The drive home takes longer than it should, and it feels like she manages to hit every red light along the way.

At least the air conditioning kicks in full blast by the time she's halfway there, and she cranks up the radio, song throbbing along with the slowing pulse in her head. Two songs in, the station drifts to a commercial break, but of course it isn't just an opportunity to zone out to people droning on about air conditioner dusting. Her own voice blares too loud from the speakers in the seconds before she can turn it off 'they thought I'd never run again'.

"Oh, shut up." She changes the station and has the wonderful luck to catch the end of the commercial on another preset station, 'I am recovery.'

She can't go anywhere these days.

She pulls into the garage twenty minutes later feeling grimy but cool. Her knee set up into a strange sort of gelatin during the drive and she wobbles a bit on the way to the door, slumping up the stairs. Spike doesn't greet her and she whistles, assuming she fell asleep on Hiccup at some point in the last fifteen minutes. Maybe she should go join their nap, that sounds like a good way to spend the afternoon.

"Hiccup?" She calls out after a minute when Spike doesn't respond, moseying into the kitchen and gulping a glass of water. Something on the counter catches her eye and she picks up a half wadded ball of plastic, spreading it out enough to separate two different sheets and reading one's label. Juicy bone, king size. Spike and Toothless are probably in opposite corners of the yard, happily distracted by defending their prizes from each other. "Why did you woo the dogs? What's going on?"

No answer.

She toes off her running shoes back by the door and pads down the hallway in her socks, stopping in her room to drop them into her hamper before continuing to Hiccup's open door. The entire room looks wrong and she pauses in the doorway, taking in the plain white sheets stretched over his bed.

"Astrid!" He spins away from his desk, standing and closing his computer in one fell swoop, grinning at her briefly before trying to contain the bright expression.

"What's with the bed?" She looks at him more carefully, frowning at

his pale green pants and matching shirt. "Are thoseâ€"Why are you wearing scrubs?"

"You're, um, you're late for your appointment," he grabs a stethoscope she hadn't noticed off of his footboard and hangs it around his neck.

"My appointment?" She raises her eyebrows, scanning the room for any other surprises and coming up dry. "What are you talking about?"

"Your appointment to have a nurse look at your knee?" He reminds her with a leading look towards her scar, and she takes in the room again. That wide, clear bed has a different meaning this time.

"Oh," she grins, taking a more confident step into the room and looking him up and down. She can't say that scrubs are a bad look for him, but they're going to look better on the floor. "Right, my appointment."

"If you'd have a seat," he gestures to the bed and she follows his suggestion, perching on the edge of the mattress and playing with her fingers in her lap, nervously excited.

They've joked about something like this, after Ruff planted the idea in her head, but he seemed to think it was hilarious when she told him. She never would have guessed that he took it to heartâ€"not that she's complaining.

"So, right knee then?" He asks, rolling his chair over to the foot of the bed and lowering it closer to the floor, making it easier to take her right foot in his lap.

"Yeah," she clears her throat, a little too absorbed in the steady fingers that caress the sides of her knee, almost convincing as medical attention.

"A little swollen," he assesses, fingers sneaking a little high on her inner thigh and she bites back a laugh. "I'll get this wrapped for you and then we can discuss the rest of your physical." He looks at her with wide, hopeful eyes, asking permission to continue as he grabs the tape and gauze from his desk, along with a pair of scissors.

"My physical?" She asks through a grin, holding her foot out towards him almost embarrassingly eager.

"This is a full service clinic," he laughs before forcing his face serious and starting to wrap her knee with a layer of gauze. His fingers glance across her thigh as he starts with a full circle before switching to wrap around her calf in a precise figure 8. "So, Astrid, aside from the knee have you been healthy lately?"

"Pretty healthy," she answers, good foot reaching out to stroke at his shin. He glares at her and pushes it away before cutting the gauze and pressing it into place. The tape comes next, perfectly tight and straight against her skin and she wonders if he's been practicing.

The thought of him rehearsing for this is hotter than it should be

and she bites her lips, scooting a little towards the edge of the bed.

"No complaints?" He asks, snipping the tape and pressing the fresh cut end to the outside of her calf to secure it. "Nothing that you want looked at?" He raises an eyebrow and she shrugs.

"I'll let you know," and it really is hard not to laugh, but laughing would ruin it. "But I'm thinking I'll probably need that full physical." He grins, gap-toothed glory inches in front of her face before he manages to contain it, eyes still twinkling obscenely.

"Alright then," he plucks the stethoscope from his neck and sticks it in his ears before placing the other end on her chest over her tee-shirt.

"Would this be easier if I took my shirt off?" She offers, and this is all a little less silly when his hand is so close to her chest, tender touch reflected in his overwhelmingly earnest expression.

"If that wouldn't make you uncomfortableâ€" "

"Not at all," she pulls the shirt over her head and drops it on the floor, sitting up a little straighter as he presses the stethoscope to the still damp skin above the line of her sports bra. "Ooh, cold."

"Sorry," he mutters, smug smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Your pulse is really fast."

"I was just on a run," she defends, breath shallow as he slides his palm along the side of her neck, pressing it against her pulse point.

That is not medical. Not at all.

"It's speeding up again," he sits back and pulls the stethoscope out of his ears so that it hangs back down like a necklace. "Is something making you nervous?"

"No," she shakes her head.

"Because you can put your shirt back on if you want to."

"It was hot anyway," she twiddles her thumbs for a minute, knees treacherously close to touching his. "I thought of a complaint."

"Is it about blood pressure medication?" He teases and she rolls her eyes.

"My leg hurts, I think I pulled something."

"Where?"

"Here," she spreads her thighs slightly and points to a spot just above the hem of her running shorts. He doesn't break eye contact.

"I'll be sure to take a look at that," he says apparently

uninterested, twirling a finger in the air. "Can you turn around? I need to check your lungs." She follows the order, swiveling to sit sideways with her freshly taped leg hanging off of the side of the mattress. He presses the stethoscope to her back, right under her shoulder blade. "Inhale and exhale."

"Do I have pneumonia?" She asks innocently as he repeats the motion in a pattern on her back.

"Sounds clear to me," he adjusts the back of her sports bra, tugging it down of all directions, and his fingers linger just barely too long against her skin. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Shoot," she turns back to face him, scooting close enough to earn a glare. She guesses she should let his game play out, no matter how easy it would be to kiss him right now.

"So you'd say you're healthy?"

"Yeah."

"Been sick lately? Colds, flu, anything like that?"

"No."

"Are you sexually active?" He raises a hand to his chin, presumably to hide the smile and Astrid takes a minute to look at just how closely those scrubs are clinging to his chest.

"Not active enough."

"How many?" he clears his throat and folds his hands in his lap. "How many partners?"

"One." And it seems like her shot to kiss him. She leans forward, lips parted slightly as her hand reaches towards his knee.

"That is a good decision," he chirps, rolling away from her and setting the athletic tape back on the desk. "Safest that way."

"You make it sound like it's not exciting," she pouts, scooting back onto the bed until she's stable and not tipping towards him.

"I'm sure it's plenty exciting," he avoids eye contact, stepping back to the bed and resting a careful hand on her shoulder. "If you could lay back?"

"Why?"

"So I can check that place on your thigh," he explains innocently, standing in front of her knees as she lays back, stomach quivering as he grabs her knees and spreads them, tracing long fingers up her thigh to probe gently at the spot she said was painful. Astrid wishes she'd gestured to something higher up. "How does that feel?"

"It hurts a little higher," she grins, but he doesn't take the bait, sliding to the outside of her thigh and touching under the line of her hip.

"Here?"

"No, more of a groin ache," she reaches down and taps the crease of her thigh. "Somewhere around here."

"Is it a throbbing or a stabbing pain?" He asks, hands resting on his own knees as he looks at her pensively.

"Would it help if I took my shorts off?"

"No, Astrid, your shorts can stay on," his hand lands back on her thigh, torturously over the thin fabric. "Here?" Hiccup checks, fingers sliding along the edge of her underwear under her shorts. "It doesn't feel like anything."

"It hurts," she insists, sitting up enough to grab his hand and guide it under the hem of her pants, sliding it upwards towards the alleged pain. "Here," she nods as his fingers brush against her, too high to be considered leg anymore.

Hiccup jerks his hand back, glaring at her.

"Astrid, I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"You're not," she insists, feigning a pained expression. "You asked if I had any complaintsâ€|"

"Ok," he sits back, hands on his knees and so, so far away. "Is the leg pain causing any systematic problems?"

"Systematic problems?" She questions, leaning back on her palms.

"Does your back hurt? Feet hurt?" He starts, and she feels her chance.

"My back, it's horrible." She turns around on the bed and pulls her sports bra over her head, peeking back over her shoulder. Hiccup is nonplussed. "Lower back, it hurts."

"If you want to cover up," he produces a towel and hands it to her. She shrugs.

"It's hot in here."

"This is a _medical_ examination, Astrid," he teases, and she can hear the smile in his voice as his hands land against her back, rubbing quietly at the sore muscle. "I don't know what you're getting at."

"My back hurts, you were right," she shrugs, arching back into his hand. "It's a systematic problem"

"It hurts here?" His hands lightly clasp the smallest point of her waist, fingertips flirtatious against her stomach. She nods, arching back against his hands and peeking over her shoulder to watch his concentrated expression. Eyebrows knit together, eyes directed cautiously down, pointed at the center of her back. Her heart quickens under the careful gaze as his fingers squeeze the sides of her ribs, ticklish and cautious and he smiles, eyes flicking to meet

hers. "How's that?"

"Good." She almost doesn't recognize the oddly breathless tone coming out of her mouth and she turns to face forward, eyes boring into the wall as his hands slide down slightly to squeeze the soft curve of her waist.

"Nothing is out of alignmentâ€|" he muses, running a fingertip along her spine from the nape of her neck to the waistband of her shorts. "Turn around."

"What?" She sits up straight, heart pounding as his hands leave warm pulsing patches on her skin.

"Turn around, your back is fine."

"Alright," she listens, goosebumps breaking out across the skin of her chest at his carefully avoiding gaze. "How is this medical?" It would be so easy to slide down onto his lap, wouldn't it? Just scoot forward off of the bed and wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him until he lets go of this whole scheme and takes his pants off. The shirt can stay on, she is enjoying the way that it clings to his chest, too tight to really be professional.

"It's never too early to start worrying about breast health, Astrid," he lectures, warm hands reaching up to cup her chest and squeezing firmly. She bites her lip at the contact against her pebbling nipples and he massages the flesh gently, scooting his chair a little closer. "Feel anything strange lately?"

"I don't really spend much time feeling," she admits, glancing down at the long freckled fingers against her chest.

"You should, lumps are killers," he lectures her, one hand leaving her chest and grabbing her wrist, placing her palm against her own chest before sitting back. "Feel anything?"

"Noâ€|" she starts a bit awkwardly, squeezing herself and grinning at the way his eyes darken. Her fingers stroke across her nipple, pinching lightly as she sucks her lower lip into her mouth. He swallows, Adam's apple bobbing like a beacon and she continues playing with herself, leaning onto her free palm. "Hiccup, this is fun and all but if you wanted to come up hereâ€|" Her knees spread invitingly and his eyes darken, emerald green drifting to forest as his hands clench together on his lap.

"Does your thigh still hurt?" He asks, standing in front of her and looming torturously close.

"Kind of," her hands drift towards him, hovering over his hips and trying to judge if he's going to let her touch him. She pinches the seams of his pants with delicate fingertips and tugs, smiling at the resistance and slowly sliding fingernails across the rasping fabric. He jumps back, attempting to look at her sternly but failing through widely dilated pupils.

"Take off your shorts."

"What if I don't feel comfortable?" She teases.

"If you feel comfortable, take off your shorts."

"Alright then," she stands, too close in front of him as she hooks her thumbs in the elastic and slides them down to her knees before kicking them off. "Underwear too?"

"Yes."

"Why so quiet, nurse?" She slides the underwear down and sits back on the edge of the bed, so unbearably close to the tightest seam of his pants.

"Lay back," he asks, clinical fingers prodding her in the shoulder until she complies, squirming to get comfortable under his near predatory gaze. "You said it hurt here?" His fingers ghost over the crease of her thigh, stroking the soft skin as his other hand hooks behind her knee and pushes it up towards her chest.

"Yeah," she mutters, spreading her legs a little further apart. "Maybe even a little higher."

"Higher?" He asks, clearing his throat as his fingers slide into her, expression somehow managing to be utterly nonplussed. "Somewhere around here?"

"That's closer," she sighs, grinding down against his fingers and squirming closer to the edge of the bed. "Right around there."

"It does feel sort of tight," his fingers hook and curl, probing at that sensitive spot deep inside of her. Her eyes flutter shut and he smiles, thumb massaging at the crease of her thigh, determined to keep up the ruse. "Did you pull it on your run? Climb any big hills?"

"A couple," she hums, stretching her hands over her head and relaxing back on the mattress.

"Does it feel like it's loosening up?" He asks, hand falling into a slow, steady rhythm in and out of her.

"Little bit. I can think of some ways to loosen it furtherâ€¦" She offers, rocking down subtly against his hand.

"Does it feel better?"

"It's getting there," she moans, eyes falling shut as the contact starts to build to something. He pulls his hand away and scoots the chair back an inch, struggling to pull his face together. This is tougher than he thought it would be. "Where are you going?" She sits up halfway, propped on an elbow.

"You feel better," he plays dumb, and it would be convincing if he didn't stick his hand in his pocket to hide his too apparent arousal. "This concludes your appointment."

"Like hell it does," she sits up straight and crosses her arms. "You started somethingâ€¦"

"I was _examining_ youâ€¦"

"And now you've got to finish it."

"Astrid, as a medical professional" but he's grinning at her flushed face and the way her hair is falling out of her ponytail.

"Nope, not pulling that one," she stands and hooks her hand through the shallow V-neck collar of his shirt, tugging him back on top of her onto the bed. He catches himself with hands on either side of her waist and she kisses him before he can finish forming his annoyed expression. He relents quickly enough, sighing against her lips as his hand finds her still bare waist and he eases his weight off of her to lean to the side. "Not teasing anymore," she mutters against his cheek, finding the waistband to his pants and slipping her fingers underneath. He's not wearing underwear and she's furious that there was only one measly layer of fabric between them this whole time.

"Hey," he warns her as she yanks her hand back out and sets about untying the waistband of his scrubs. "Easy there."

"Malpractice," she mutters mostly to herself, yanking his pants down to mid-thigh. "I'm going to sue you for malpractice. Can you even sue nurses for malpractice?" He tries not to laugh at her wide blue eyes, crazed and eager as she struggles with his loosened pants, stopping to stroke at his shaft through that last annoying layer of clothing.

"Astrid, slow down, maybe we shouldn't" He says it mostly to see her reaction. She sits back on her haunches, chest heaving not at all unpleasantly with frustrated breaths.

"What?"

"I'm just saying, you were hurt"

"No, it was a sore muscle," she shakes her head, staring at him like he's both her steak dinner and the thing keeping her from eating. "Shouldn't I stretch it out and keep it warm?" She doesn't realize it sounds suggestive until it's out of her mouth and she scrambles to touch him again, hand sliding up his stomach under his shirt. He gulps at her fingernails digging into his diaphragm.

"Are you ok?"

"Why don't you tell me?" She laughs near hysterically, grabbing his hand and placing it on the left side of her chest. Her heart is vibrating under his palm, and she's breathing nearly unnaturally hard and suddenly the game isn't funny anymore. He leans up to kiss her shoulder, hand sliding down to cup her chest and making her whine.

"Your heart is beating like crazy."

"Your fault," she complains, leaning into the touch and falling back amazingly compliant when he nudges at her shoulder. His lips meet her neck and she whimpers, head lolling to the side. "For being an absolute tease."

"Hey," he mumbles against her skin, sliding his own pants down with a

careful hand and hovering over her. Her hand reaches down to grip him and she wraps both legs around his hips, trying to pull him towards her with shaking muscles.

"Come on," she urges, head falling back against the bed exasperated as she attempts to line him up. "Please."

Hearing Astrid _beg_, voice broken and haggard is a shot down his spine and he exhales shakily.

"This worked better than I expected," he muses quietly, swiping her bangs out of her eyes.

"Yeah, you're sweet, I get it. Come on."

"That's not a very nice way to ask me," he laughs, nipping at her earlobe. She melts beneath him, droopy arms only half solid against the back of his neck.

"Come on, Hiccup. Please, this is ridiculous." He pushes in with a sigh, suddenly cradled within her and she moans, still boneless against the bed beneath them. He's never seen her so completely sapped and there's something deeply flattering in the way that she absolutely melts against him, limp arm hooked around her neck as she moans uncontrollably, leg hooked around the back of his knees. "Yeah, please."

"I don't knowâ€|" he kisses her temple and stops inside of her for a moment, biting his lip at the way she grips at him, pulsing even when he's still. She pouts and closes her eyes, arching into him with a whine. "You might need a little warming up, stillâ€|" This time is a blatant tease and she clings to his neck, burrowing her nose into the soft crook beneath his ear.

"Come on, just go. Please, Iâ€"I can'tâ€" Her leg tightens around the back of his knees and she whimpers, rocking her hips underneath his.

"Alright," he smiles, infuriatingly proud of himself for the two seconds before her eyes close and he starts to thrust in earnest, stroking that sensitive spot deep inside of her. "Like that?"

"Harder," she whines, rucking up the back of his scrubs enough to rake her fingernails across his lower back. "You can't tease me like that." She moans as he starts to thrust in earnest, each motion echoing through her chest cavity like an earthquake. That's what she needs. There it is. "Right there. God, don't stop."

"And these seems pretty successful to me," he plants one last sloppy kiss on her forehead before tucking his head into her shoulder and concentrating, frowning eyebrows pressed against her shoulder as he nearly bottoms out, so hard and full inside of her.

They stop joking quickly after that and he gets absorbed with the oddly boneless feel of her against him, soft thigh tucked up against his hip to deepen the angle. She's never this complicit, even when she's urging him to take control, and he can't believe that he managed to make her that way. Just the thought that he can break her down like this, make her pliable like she does to him every second of

the day, is scintillating and he starts to shed the persona, arching against her more deeply and wishing he'd taken the time to take off his pants.

"Hiccup," she moans in his air, her hand snaking between them and rubbing at her clit, slow and almost aimless as it glances across the base of him on every thrust. He kisses the side of her cheek and starts thrusting impossibly harder, hips slamming against hers with every move, bracing and sweet. "Yes" she nods against him, arching into the motion and clenching her leg behind his.

He's almost not prepared for it when she clenches and cries out underneath him, free hand digging into his shoulder blade through that mysteriously sexy scrubs shirt. It doesn't take him long to follow, half a dozen thrusts behind and still appreciating the deeply sweet feeling of her walls without the condom barrier. He rolls off of her carefully, sprawled exposed on the stretched tight white sheet.

"So, should I keep the scrubs?" He's still panting, hand slung across her stomach as he pants just hard enough to make her want another round.

"Keep them, definitely keep them," she nods resolute despite her still boneless body. "You should wear them more."

"Definitely," Hiccup grins at her, almost abashedly excited by her still limp and trembling legs.

"But" Astrid pauses and smiles up at him as deviously as she can manage. "That sort of put a kink in my back."

"A kink, huh?" He grins and rolls slightly towards her, elbow not quite ready to support his weight.

"Just a _little_ one."

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"You don't have to do this," Astrid looks at the long table of half-full dixie cups before glancing up at the mercilessly beating sun. "I mean, go sit at the finish line in one of the air-conditioned tents."

She looks like a fond memory, golden tan shoulders hanging out of her lycra racing top with a bold red checkmark on her chest above that already wrinkled bib. Cheerleader skirts never really did it for him, their extra high slits always felt like cheating somehow, like he was being bamboozled into something. Astrid's shorts are the delicious opposite, functional and clinging to the muscled curve at the top of her inner thigh.

He licks his heat chapped lips before answering.

"I'll be there when you get there," he shrugs, "but I thought it might help to see my bright and shining face at mile six."

"It's hellishly hot out here," Astrid looks at him carefully, funneling her worry into watching for a harbinger of sunburn on his freckled forehead.

"And you've got to go run. So hydrate." He hands her one of the cups.
"And I have to practice handing cups to people."

"You're a pro," she drinks the water back and runs impossibly clammy hands over her thighs. "I'm not going to have time to warm up if I don't go now."

"Then go," his hand is comfortingly cool on her greasy sunscreened shoulder and Ruff honks her car horn impatiently behind them.

"45 minutes to race time, Hofferson." The girl hoots out her window, sunglasses glinting in unison with her grin.

"Give me a minute," Astrid shouts back with a laugh and uneasily rocks forward onto her tip toes. She turns back to Hiccup and bites her lower lip, chewing pensively and glancing between his face and the table behind him. "I've got to go." Her feet remain planted against already searing asphalt.

"I know," he nods, faltering at her odd expression and look at her thin, compressive knee wrap. "Is the knee ok?"

"Feels great," she manages a brief but real grin before sighing and closing her eyes, lips moving silently in some private prayer.

"Are you-"

"Late?" She barks an awkward laugh and pushes a shock of blonde behind her ear, wishing for an extra pin. "Very."

"Are you nervous?" He finishes the question with a leading smile and Astrid glares at him, crossing her arms so tightly that the skin around her elbows drains of color.

"No-I'm-I've done this dozens-no, hundreds of times. I'm not-That's ridiculous," she snaps rocking again onto the balls of her feet and shaking out tingling fingers.

"It's perfectly normal," his calming palms cup her shoulders and keep her convincingly grounded. "And your knee will be fine, and your race will be great."

"I want-I know that I don't have to win, but that's almost worse." She shakes her head and looks down at their feet, eyes catching on how perfectly the hard like of her knee brace lines up with Hiccup's blunted, metal foot. "I've never done this without the pressure before."

"Then just enjoy it," Hiccup laughs, gripping her shoulders a little more tightly. "13.1 miles of solid gold fun."

"I still want to win," she admits, eyes steely above an almost apologetic smile. "At least for women, for my age group. Something."

"Then go win," he shrugs, like it really is that easy. "You're perfectly capable. I've seen you training and...and it's _familiar_."

"Familiar?" She cocks her head, nervous twitching fingertip stroking the soft hem of her shorts.

"Yeah, you look a lot like that runner _Astrid Hofferson_. You know, the world champion in the 3k?" Her punch to his bicep is gentle and necessary.

"What's the difference?" Shadowed insecurity leaks through her voice in droves and Hiccup braces his hands firmly against her.

"You're older, smarter, and more sure than ever that you _want_ to do this." The worried wrinkles practically carved into her forehead relax slightly. "And you're way prettier in person." She rolls her eyes and fails at stifling a smile.

"I'm nervous."

"I know. You'll be great. I'll see you here in an hour and twenty minutes. Tops." She nods to herself and bounces from foot to foot. "Forty minutes until the gun, you've got to go."

"Yeah, I do." She pops onto tiptoes and kisses him on the cheek to avoid the distraction of his delightfully chapped lips. "See you in a little over an hour then." One last thankful glance before she turns and jogs towards Ruff's still open passenger door."

"Oh, and Astrid?" Hiccup calls after her, grinning when she frowns at him, obviously nervous for whatever he has to say. "If you're going to win this, start fast. And I love you."

"If?" She laughs, the wunderkind matured staring at him with an impossibly wide grin. "It's when, thanks. And I love you too."

"Did you guys know you're just _adorable_?" Ruff drawls as Astrid slides into the front seat and buckles up with still trembling hands. She's never been this fruitlessly nervous in her life.

The absolute worst thing that could happen is that she could lose.

She probably will lose. This is her first half marathon, she'll probably lose.

"Yeah, that whole display was only to make you nauseous," Astrid snips, shrugging shoulders and flexing calves and searching out tightness that just isn't there.

"You sound nervous."

"I am," Astrid shrugs, because Hiccup is utterly right. It's normal.

"Yeah, what if your knee explodes?" Ruff chuckles, speeding up the soon to be closed road towards the starting line.

"My knee is perfect," Astrid gloats, tracing her pale, flat scar through the brace. "And my scar is fantastic. And you are jealous."

"Completely true," Ruff glowers briefly out of the windshield before

brightening. "It is great that you're running today though." Astrid narrows her eyes at the side of Ruff's face, peering past those sunglasses for a hint to the butt of the joke. "Seriously, I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks," Astrid smiles and does her best to relax, legs twitching with nervous energy.

She's flaky and too warm when she talks to Gobber about strategy and tells him that she wants to win. She's jittery as she stretches and jogs slow laps around the field near the starting line, loosening her calves until her flats feel right on her feet. They're still dusty, still familiar, and the one thing that Nike's merchandise can never replace.

She's downright trembling when someone recognizes her in front of a TV by the sign in station, pointing between her and the screen with a too big grin as her own confident voice blares through the heat crackling speakers.

Astrid has never been so nervous on a starting line in her life, hands cold and clammy and clenched into fists as she stands by one side of the 'Start' banner and tries to edge her way through a restless cloud of weekenders and few professionals for a front and center start.

The gun goes off and she's suddenly solid, years of experience and months of wistful desire rushing back in those first few strides. She starts fast, because she's going to win.

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**So. Hiccup in scrubs. And Astrid is racing again. **

**And Hiccup in scrubs, which is a way more pleasant image than it should be. **

**Don't forget to tell me what you think before moving onto the next (and last!) chapter! **

25. Chapter 25

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The rain starts almost on time, drizzle developing into deluge right as the roof of Toothless's old rickety shed appears over the crest of the hill. Astrid bites back a laugh, like it's five years ago, and runs up the trail, mostly empty backpack bouncing against the thick wool of her old letter jacket. She's soaked by the time she bursts through the creaky door, cramming into the far corner and leaving Hiccup too much room. He follows not far behind, breathing hard and dripping wet as he closes the door, enveloping the room in almost oppressive darkness.

Her backpack thunks to the floor, half in the spirit of recreation and half to make herself more comfortable, wet wool coat sticking to the splinters behind her.

Her eyes adjust, and his hazy features distinguish themselves from

the darkness, cheeks glowing nervous and bright in the muted, flickering light leaking through the walls. She gasps involuntarily as he steps closer, electric chemistry brewing between them like something forbidden.

He might as well be seventeen again with the way his frantic heartbeat is pounding against his ribcage. She looks like lonely cafeteria lunches and sweaty palms, wide eyed and soaked against the wall, reverent space between them the elephant in the room. She's shivering, teeth chattering quietly in the dark and he steps imperceptibly closer, metal foot scuffing at the dirt and trying to shatter the ambiance.

His hand finds her wrist in the darkness, cold and clammy against his palm and he licks his lips, breath shaky and nervous like she's about to snap his arm. Again.

He shuffles cautiously closer, chest inches from hers as her shivering abates to something closer to nervous trembling, fingers brushing the skin of his thumb and lighting his whole arm on fire.

She's leaning, slow and nervous, magnetic blue eyes scanning his face and drawing him in with invisible strings. He almost expects Toothless to bang open the door and shatter the sphere of carefully cultivated disbelief, but her lips finally brush his, almost too lightly to be considered a kiss. They both gasp, momentarily drowning out the drumming sound of the rain.

An uncharacteristically cautious hand finds his shoulder, fingers curling in his damp sweatshirt as she pulls him down towards her, mouth coaxing his to move with light, gentle kisses. He's so caught up in that jacket and the wet hair and smudged make up that make her look seventeen and untouchable that it honestly takes him a moment to respond. She sighs against him when he starts to kiss her, hand finding her waist over the coat and resting too gently against her.

She plants his other hand on her hip, now lonely wrist absolutely on fire as she hooks her arm around his neck, urging his mouth open with her tongue. He gasps and recoils slightly, because this is all so real and her track pin is digging into the chest of his sweatshirt, creaking damp cotton momentarily audible over the pounding rain. A low groan escapes his throat and he's playing shy and cautious so well that she's on fire. All those old nameless emotions, confusing and too strong pulse through her body like pure adrenaline and she clings harder to his neck, backed up against splintered wood with not enough of his wiry weight pressed against her.

"Hiccupâ€¦" she whispers against his cheek, dragging his lower lip into her mouth and nibbling in a way that makes him sigh and shake, hand so unbearably tender against her hip. He loved her this much even back then. "Kiss me."

"Oh _God_," he groans, sounding more like the _man_ she loves as his fingers dig into her hip through her jeans, pressing himself closer. She can feel a growing bulge insistent against her lower stomach even through the thick jacket, absolutely giving him away. "Astrid, Iâ€¦"

"Kiss me," she orders, angry and nervous and so much her younger self it's terrifying.

He listens, hand braced against her waist tugging her so gently onto her toes as he leans harder against her, lending the illusion of pinning her. She moans low in her throat as his lips come back to hers, moving slowly and softly, sending sparks through her skin. Her hand pushes into his damp hair, fingernails curling against his scalp and dragging him closer. His tented jeans press hot against her thigh as she hooks it over his hip and she wonders just how many times he's thought about this.

"Astrid" he sighs, tugging her harder against him, mouth tracing the line of her jaw with surprisingly hot breath, cancelling the general chill of the room. "I" he groans, hands smoothing eagerly down her sides as he kisses her ear, hips rocking subconsciously against her. The wall creaks, rain dripping on the side of her neck through the slats, icy in the steamy air around them.

"What?" she asks, head lolling to the side as he sucks on her neck, hard enough to show that he's obviously trying to leave a mark. She arches against him, hands clutching at his shoulders and keeping him close as his chin scrapes against her collar. He would have needed far more encouragement five years ago, encouragement that she wasn't equipped to give, but this is better. Hot and raw and unkempt like that never acknowledged teenage lust drowned out by love before they could act on it.

"Can I?" He asks, pupils impossibly wide in front of her as shaking fingers find her zipper. She restrains a smile. Barely.

"Aren't we moving a bit fast?" She jokes, kiss swollen lips obvious and throbbing on her flushed face. His tongue darts across his lower lip and he looks at her pleadingly, sharp jaw too old for wide, hopeful eyes.

"Please," he dives back into her neck, sucking another obvious hickey below her jaw. She whines at the pressure and he rocks against her, shyness fading every second that he looks at her in that goddamned jacket, wet ponytail pulled over her shoulder and tangled from his hands. Her zipper is pulled all the way to her neck and he can't help but assume she's naked underneath, given where they are and what they were planning. Just the thought of touching all that creamy golden skin with that coat still clinging to her shoulders is almost too much and his hands start to shake in earnest.

No matter how many times he imagined this encounter ending differently, it never went that well.

"Alright," she snaps, suppressing a laugh as her hands fall to her sides, feigning tough reluctance. He exhales, adorably flushed as he drags down the zipper like opening the last, biggest Christmas present, savoring the experience. His heavy breathing drowns out the rain as he opens the jacket a few inches, revealing the slick, mostly white tank top underneath, embellished with a rubbery blue B on the front.

"Is that?" His mouth goes dry as he remembers those days with a lonely clipboard, watching her run in that uniform and wanting her more than anything.

"From senior year," she grins and lets her jacket fall a little wider open. "Gobber gave it to me after nationals, I just haven't had a reason to wear it." His hand slips inside of her coat, resting cautiously against her waist like he's not sure she's real. "I thought you'd like itâ€¦"

"I love it," he kisses her so enthusiastically that it shakes the shed, downright vicious lips moving against her like he's trying to devour her whole. He growls against her mouth when his thumb finds the line of her sports bra under the fabric, pushing his thigh between her legs and grinding it against her. "Do you have any idea how sexy you are right now?" His tongue dives back into her mouth as his hands reverently grip her waist.

"So I should wear the shorts next time?" She gasps, rocking against his leg and he jerks upright, face notably pale.

"Y-you have the shorts?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, the shorts," he moans, nodding quickly and pulling her back into him by her waist, peppering grateful kisses across her forehead. "How I used to gape at you in those shorts," he laughs, voice low and almost gravely. "And you had the blue ones from track, but they just weren't the same," he nudges his thigh carefully between her legs and her eyes briefly roll back into her head. "The white ones were almost see through in the right light, right here," he grips the outside of her thigh, sliding his hand up to her hip.

"I didn't realize you spent so much time looking," she squeaks as his leg presses just right against the seam of her jeans.

"So much time," he admits, hiking her thigh over his hip and grinding against her again. There are far too many clothes between them, but it only adds to the forbidden sweetness, the feeling that they're sneaking away to do something naughty.

"What did you want me to do?" She asks, freeing her leg from his grip and pushing him backward until he's leaning against the dusty workbench on the other side of the shed. Her lips latch onto his neck as eager hands wiggle into his back pockets and squeeze. "This?" He groans at her soft voice in her ear and her hand slides around the cup the stubborn bulge under his zipper. "Or this?" She kisses him, that damn uniform making raspy, silky noises against his sweatshirt. "Or did you think about this?" She unbuckles his belt with deft fingers and kneels before he can say anything, taking pants and underwear with her and revealing him to the freezing air.

And then she takes him into her mouth and his whole world condenses to warm, wet lips, blue eyes and Hofferson scrawled in woolen cursive across the shoulders of her jacket.

"Ohâ€¦" he moans, white knuckled grip clamped on the edge of the table as his knees go weak.

"So did you think about this?" She asks again, pulling away to look up at him and letting her hand take over pumping across the slick skin. And back into her warm mouth, with her tongue sliding lovingly

along his flesh.

"I didn't think I'd get so lucky," he groans, hand falling to her hair, pulse racing at the feel of that messy ponytail.

"But you did think about it," he can feel her smile as she talks against his length, kissing teasingly before slipping him back into her mouth with a too loud slurp. She starts to bob her head, slow and teasing, and he strokes the top of her head, moaning appreciatively. "You thought about me on my kneesâ€¦" she trails off, back to that maddeningly slow motion, the head of him just brushing the back of her throat on every stroke.

"I don't know if I was that creative," he lies, a million boyhood fantasies spinning through his head and falling short of blissful reality.

"So what did you think about?" She asks, voice velvety smooth as her hand keeps him occupied with slick fingers. "Were we in your bed? In the backseat of your car?" Her tongue swipes his entire length impossibly sweetly.

"Iâ€¦" his voice drifts off as he looks back down at her, making torturous eye contact as she slides her mouth back over him and sucks down his length. And he can see those uniform straps peeking out from under her insanely alluring letter jacket, all beautiful jock and slow, slurping tongue all around himâ€¦ "Wait, stop," he nearly yelps, breathing too hard and nudging her shoulder with a wobbly knee. She glares up at him and he almost loses it. "I was about toâ€¦"

"I know. That was intentional."

"I want you," he says simply, and if she ignores the aftertaste of him on her lips and his near purple shaft in her hand, he's almost sweet and innocent as that awkward first meeting in this shed.

"Yeah, ok. Yeah," she stands and nods, moving to take off her jacket, but stern hands drag it back onto her shoulders. "What?"

"That stays on," he unbuttons her jeans, pushing them down to her knees, brusquely gathered with nice underwear that he doesn't stop to notice. "Those come off," he nods, holding her arms as she toes her shoes off and steps out of her pants, shivering and bare from the waist down. He looks at her for a second, eyes heated and markedly appreciative as he takes his sweatshirt off and sets it on the worktable. "Come here," but he doesn't give her time to answer, picking her up and setting her on his discarded jacket. She wraps her bare legs around his waist, pushing his pants further down with her heels and pulling him closer.

"Not so timid thenâ€¦"

"You know what I did think of?" He mutters, reaching careful fingers between her legs and testing her wetness with an almost pained hiss before lining himself up. She's enjoying this as much as he is, and it sends him into hyper drive as his hands start shaking against her waist, hips trembling excited pressed into her inner thighs. They're going to have to remember this table, it puts the height of the kitchen counter to shame. "I thought of this," he sinks into place

with a slow, languorous thrust. "I thought of being alone with you, and joking with you." He buries his head in her shoulder and pulls out halfway before sliding back into the tight space with a low groan. She gasps, fingernails digging into his back as he rolls his hips harder against hers, notably confident. "And I thought of making you laugh," thrust, "and I thought about talking to you," thrust, "and I thought about knowing you."

"Was the jacket involved?" She laughs, voice breathy and insubstantial as the pressure starts to build inside of her, stoked and prodded by long smooth strokes.

"The jacket is a bonus," he pulls her hips closer to the edge of the table, deepening the angle slightly and holding her still as he starts to pick up the pace. Her heels lock around his thighs, keeping him close even as the walls of the shed start to rattle rhythmically. "Such a bonus, you have no idea."

"I think I have an idea," she moans, clutching tight to his neck and trying to grind back against his rhythm. "This isâ€¦"

"A long time coming," he wraps an arm around her, slick against the fabric of her uniform. "I thought I'd never have you. I thoughtâ€¦"

"I'm right here," she pulls his forehead against hers, lips clashing sloppily in the half light. "Right here."

"Not going to last much longer," he warns, thrusts scattered and falling apart.

"Hiccup," she moans in his ear, arms clasped around his back, fingernails digging into his skin through his tee-shirt. "I loveâ€¦" he tenses, slamming a hand into the table beside her hips and pulsing inside of her, forehead slipping down to rest against her shoulder, hot against that cold, damp coat.

"I love you too," he mutters, shoulders still shaking as his hands light on the outside of her thighs and he pulls out, fixing his pants with trembling fingers and kneeling in front of her, spreading her thighs further.

"Was this something else that you thought about?" She asks, scooting closer to the edge of the table and leaning back on her palms.

"Why so curious?" He's still out of breath, damp tips of his hair tickling her thigh as he kisses towards her center.

"I don't know," she fists one hand in his hair, not taking the time to feel bad about the handful of dust she takes with her. "It'sâ€¦come on," she urges, tugging him towards her and moaning prematurely as his lips brush an inch away from their destination. "You were so excited about this, I want to know why."

"Because in high school," he nuzzles against her, and her hand tightens against his scalp, "you were everything I couldn't have." His tongue laps out to lick her, flinching at the odd mixed taste but searching out her clit anyway, flicking his tongue across it. "And having you means that I overcame all of that."

"So you were into thisâ€"mmm, yesâ€"for the letter jacket?" Her heels dig into his back as he sucks and teases at her, thumbs digging into her inner thighs and massaging lightly.

"I was into this, because I couldn't stop myself," he admits, reaching over to rub her clit with his thumb, pressing just hard enough to be maddening and kissing along her inner thigh. "And I stayed for everything under the jacket." His mouth slides back onto her, tongue laving and rolling around the sensitive button harder, teeth brushing carefully against the sensitive skin.

"Okâ€"ok, don't stop," she urges, because he's very suddenly on the right track, fire building in her chest to the point where it's almost painful, catching in her lungs. "Don't stop, don't stop," she whimpers, fingers clenched more tightly in his hair as she arches against the table and her toes curl against his back. She finishes with a groan as her fingernails take a strip of splinters off of the table behind her, fresh pale wood lines scrawled through the dust.

Hiccup stands, wiping his mouth on his forearm with a grimace before breaking his face splits into a broad grin and he kisses her cheek.

"Thank you, for doing this," her hands wrap around his neck and she holds herself up, legs shaking with some combination of the fatigue and cold. "Because I know it's been horrible for you," she laughs and tucks her forehead to his chest.

"So horrible," Astrid agrees quietly before leaning back to look at him. "Mind grabbing my pants? Getting cold."

"Yeah, no problem," he bows out from under her arms and picks up her jeans from the floor and grinning at the underwear inside. He holds the skimpy thong towards her, "you wore this?"

"Yeah, for all that you noticed. I would have been better off with uniform shorts."

"I'm keeping these," he ignores her, stuffing the underwear into his pocket and fixing his belt before handing her the jeans. "Souvenir."

"You're going to make me walk home commando?" She wiggles trembling feet into her pants. He turns around and opens the shed door, wincing at the cold air and tugging it shut immediately.

"I don't think we'll be walking home anytime soon," he grins at her a bit sheepishly, offering his arms for support as she stands still rickety and tugs her pants the rest of the way up.

"The dogs are inside, right?"

"Yeah," Hiccup scoffs. "Probably still on my bed."

"Well, you washed your sheets, it's irresistible," she reaches behind her and picks up his sweatshirt, grimacing at the thick layer of gooey dust practically ground into it but attempting to hand it to him anyway.

"I'm good, I'll just shiver," he waves it off, "I don't look good in dust anyway."

"Then come here, your hair is full of it," he bends over and lets her comb the gray tufts out of his still damp hair. "Okâ€|I think you're good."

"Thank you," he grins at her, taking the sweatshirt and setting it back in the clean place on the edge of the table.

"So do we have anything to do in here?" She takes a wincing step as the wetness between her legs meets the seam of her jeans and sits down on the stool behind him, pulling her hands within the sleeves of her jacket.

"I can think of a few things," he mutters, a little taken by the way she's disappearing into that coat.

"We _just_ got dressed," she grins, zipping up and shrugging the thick shoulders up to her ears in a way that makes Hiccup blush and stumble over nothing while standing still.

"Iâ€|I do have this radio," he thumps the plastic case, awkward and adorable as he reaches under the table to produce a waterproof case full of a handful of tools and a couple of D-cell batteries still in the package. "I used to hang out here with Toothless a lot." Hiccup uses his pocket knife to cut the plastic packaging and pries open the battery slot, inserting one of the big metal cylinders.

"Oh, that's when you did all of this thinking about meâ€|" she lowers her eyes, flirtatious as her hand reaches out and lands against his side.

"Some of it," he admits, flicking on the radio and allowing it to search for a station as he leans towards her, hand slipping boldly into her pocket and stroking against her stomach.

'Oh I changed his nappies, I've known Henry 'is whole life! Only I call 'im Hiccup, because every uncle comes with a nick name,' Gobber's voice rings out from the radio, filtered through static but true and Hiccup jerks back fast enough to give himself a head rush. 'But I only met Astrid when she showed up fer cross country, glarin' at everyone like she weighed more 'n a hundred pounds.'

'But you did know both of them when they met?' An interviewer asks, and Astrid recognizes her as one of the afternoon people on the radio station that broadcasts high school sports.

"Why is this it's first choice in station?" Astrid asks, shoving her hands into her pockets and trying to warm up.

"I don't know, it was searching on random," he presses the search button on the radio, searching through six or seven blurbs of static before it settles back on Gobber's voice. "It's all we're getting."

'â€|no one saw it comin' she'd sooner punch 'im than look at 'im. But after she snapped 'is armâ€|'

'She broke his arm?'

'She used te be like tha', all breakin' arms an' yellin' at people. Anyway, after she broke 'is arm, they really started talkin' an' bein' all secretive about itâ€'

"He's exaggerating it," Astrid complains, cheeks bright red even as she looks squarely at Hiccup. "We weren't _sneaking _around." Hiccup looks around the shed, utterly private even without the rain and so instrumental in recreating that time. He doesn't say anything about it.

'â€|an' then she was around the shelter a lot, and at Hiccup's house. That's when I started the pool wit' the teachers, two to one odds they'd go te prom together, four to one they'd be together by Christmas. I won six hundred dollars offa it, good times,' Gobber laughs and the interviewer laughs with him.

'Well, even with all the hubbub of Astrid running her first race post-injury last month,' at least Astrid feels proud of this blurb, that first place in her age group a sign that she somehow still has the talent, 'we haven't heard this side of the story.'

'Ye should have seen it, them comin' back from Worlds together in the Spring, tighter'n peas in a pod. I'd wager Hiccup became a man on tha' tripâ€'" Hiccup reaches out and clicks the power button on the radio, sending the room into drizzling quiet, rain still pounding on the roof of the shed.

"And he just said that on the radio," Hiccup nods, as if the future suffering is matter of fact.

"Only people interested in Berk high school sports even listen to that station. It's not exactly going worldwide," Astrid comforts him, reaching her hand across the space to squeeze his shoulder.

"It's on the internet now," he sighs.

"I don't mind people knowing," Astrid shrugs, jutting her chin forward in premature defense. "It's not my favorite thing in the world but it's better than being asked about my knee."

"You'd rather answer questions about my virginity than your knee?" He laughs, scooting a bit closer to her and leaning back against the table.

"Your virginity, or lack thereof, is a happy subject," her shoulder bumps against him, fond and gentle in the chilling room. All the heat they've generated is leaking through the wide gaps in the walls, and he's starting to look genuinely cold, white flesh of his arms nearly blue. "Come here, I can fit some of you in here with me," she stands, unzipping her jacket and reaching out for him.

"I'm fine, Astrid," he insists, shivering as his fingers brush across her uniform when he reaches to zip her jacket back up. She steps closer, tucking his arms around her and hugging his shoulders, nose buried in his still warm chest. "Ok, that is warmer."

"Better?"

"I wasn't that cold," he laughs, kissing the top of her head.

"You warm me up, I warm you up, that's how it works," she almost orders, the command far more tender than her acting earlier.

"I'll get used to it," he consents entirely, fingers linking warmly behind her lower back and holding her close, warm for a million different reasons.

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10 weeks. 10 weeks with this ring in his pocket. Toothless thinks he's pathetic, and he's probably right.

He just...Hiccup looks over at Astrid, under a light blanket on the couch with Spike half on her lap, book propped open against the dog's shoulder with her face illuminated by the flickering TV. She's beautiful, as always, but it's more than that. It's the comforting feeling of home that he never really had until she was around. She laughs at something on the page, lips pulled into a peaceful smile.

He just started work and the commute is hell. He wants to come out and he wants her to come with him. Her summer grad classes are starting next week and she'll be driving soon too, as she hasn't made any real moves towards securing a new lease after moving out of last year's apartment. He wants to tell her about this new project, the one that comes with a bonus and a raise and is an immediate promotion everywhere but on paper. Everything is hingeing on him just asking her.

Fishlegs, Ruff, his dad. Gobber. Everyone knows. Everyone tells him that it'll be fine and no big deal and she'll say yes. 'Of course' is a phrase he's come to hate. Everyone comments on his mother's ring, cherished and safe in the crushed velvet box eternally in his pocket and ignores his nerves like a nonevent.

Astrid looks over at him and smiles, making a silly face at Toothless before turning back to her book and stroking Spike's sleepy head. Her hair is braided over her opposite shoulder and he loves that, loves how it reveals the smooth curve of her neck, summer freckles winking at him from her subtly flickering pulse point. He loves the way she frowns and bites her lip when she's reading, even though she's probably read it a hundred times before. He loves how she's empathetic without trying and how she makes silly faces at his dog.

"Astrid, will-" It bursts out of his mouth like a foreign entity, the monster from Alien throwing itself against the back of his teeth.

"Will I what?" She looks up, head cocked slightly sideways.

"Nothing," he tries to recover, staring at the TV and blinking slowly. Toothless sighs and shakes his head, resting his disappointed chin on the ground.

Sometimes his boy needs too much help, it's ridiculous.

"No, just tell me." He should know he's doomed the second she sets

her book face down on the coffee table, turning to give him her full attention. She blinks and he blinks, anti-communication in stunted morse code. "Do you feel ok?"

"Great," he squeaks. Like a hamster. Toothless gives him a disdainful look and slumps across the room to judge him from afar. Hiccup does his best to ignore the wolf, clearing his throat and trying again. "I feel fine."

"You look sort of pale," she frowns, concern etched into just peaceful features and Spike cocks her head at him, big gray eyes staring through his soul. The pit's disdain matches Toothless' perfectly and she slumps to the ground, slinking across the room to gossip with the wolf.

"I'm not-I'm fine," he pacifies her with a smile and she returns it, sending shivers down the back of his neck.

Come on. This is pathetic. This is Astrid. Astrid who he's been with for five and a half years. Astrid. The one who had the flu over winter break and puked in a bucket next to his bed. They've seen each other naked. A lot.

Although somehow picturing her in her underwear doesn't seem like the right self-soothing technique right now.

Is there ever going to be a right time? Is there ever going to be some picture-perfect moment? He wants to think so, he wants to wait and scheme and worry, but the box suddenly feels like it's on fire in his pocket.

He should just go put it in his room for the night. he doesn't need to sit here and let two dogs and an inanimate object nag him. He leans forward to stand up and in a film-worthy slapstick moment that surely belongs on that shelf of embarrassing family videos, he falls out of his seat onto his knees. Astrid stares at him, one hand half-extended towards her book.

"Are you ok?"

"Astrid," he sets his jaw, confused and scared and determined all at once as he decides to be done with this horrible awkward wait. He's done scarier things before, if you add them all together. His good leg slides forward slowly to prop in front of him, and even though it's not his steadiest position, he holds steady, almost missing her widening eyes through a struggle for balance. He's glad he doesn't, there's something bolstering in the fact that she doesn't look anything but surprised.

"Oh," she mutters, lips parted as her breath shudders out.

"Will-" he pauses to bring the box out of his pocket and open it in front of him. Her hand retreats back to her lap and she stares at him, blue eyes strangely shiny. "I know that this seems like a weird time, and I should be-we should be somewhere scenic or romantic," he starts, doubting himself and fidgeting slightly under her fixated gaze, "but it seems right. I could've taken you out somewhere, but that's not why I'm doing this. I don't love you because of dates or fancy dinners or-I want this. I want to spend time with you, and you're reading and I'm watching TV and tinkering with something, and

the dogs are here in this comfortable silence...if every night for the rest of my life was just like this one, I'd be the luckiest man alive." He pauses wondering the entire time if it's to catch his breath or for dramatic effect.

Neither, he can't breathe and time is stretching out in front of him like an impossible canyon. "Will you marry me?"

She's nodding before he finishes the sentence.

"Yes," her voice is quiet, but it resonates through his chest like a meteor, drowning out these ten weeks of anxiety with the one syllable that's absolutely worth it. "Yes," she repeats, a little louder as she climbs off the couch and drags him to his feet with a kind hand on his arm. "You didn't have to kneel," her hand is shaking as she offers it to him, and it takes him two tries to slip the thin, gold band over her fourth finger. The diamond twinkles in the muted light of the TV and takes Hiccup's breath away when it fits, snug and secure against her skin.

The velvet box falls to the floor and he shuffles closer, her hand resting in both of his.

"It fits."

"How did you get my size?" She asks quietly, free hand shaking against his shoulder.

"It's...it's my mom's," he smiles to himself, more reverent than sad. "I asked my dad for it weeks ago."

"You've been planning this for weeks?" She laughs, patting his shoulder emphatically in a way that's probably supposed to be a slap. "Why the hell did you wait so long?"

"I was nervous," he admits, watching her fingers curl around his, and it's amazing like the first time in a hospital room in another era.

"You didn't have to be nervous," she says plainly, hand wrapping around the back of his neck.

"Move in with me?" Because one plunge isn't enough, he has to keep pushing.

"Move in with you?" She grins and then the expression falters. He thumbs the diamond on her finger and feels like he could fly. "I can't afford that, I could barely afford my studio." They don't need to mention a yard for the dogs, it's wonderfully implied.

"I-I just got a raise, and a new project and-"

"A raise? You just started," but she's grinning and kissing his cheek. "That's fantastic but...I don't...I couldn't ask you to-"

"I'm asking," he leans down and presses his forehead against hers. "Move in with me. You can pay me back later, I'll keep a tab."

"This isâ€¦" she stares at her hand, fingers still shaking beneath

their new, happy burden. "Yes. Let's do it. We can start looking this weekend."

"No, now," he laughs, hands falling around her waist and picking her up too effortlessly, holding her tucked against his chest.

"What's the rush?" She pushes against his chest enough to get back on her feet. "We have," forever. He smiles and leans down to kiss her, nose pressing insistently into her cheek. "We have time."

"I've been thinking about it for weeks. I'm done waiting," he kisses her again, tongue slipping out briefly to flick across her lips, too elated that he's going to get to do that every day for the rest of his life. "Now, let's start looking."

"Do...do we have to start looking _right _now?" He nods insistently and she sighs, hands sliding down his chest to his belt buckle and fiddling with the clasp. "Really? _Right_ now?"

"I guess we have a little timeâ€¦"

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**And it's over! Woohoo, I could kiss the ground I'm so excited. I'm going to have so much time to sleep and I don't even know, but it's going to be fantastic. **

Thank you all so much for reading, my own little thanks is sent out in the form of that proposalâ€¦which I promised I wouldn't do, but then Hiccup informed me he had a damn **_speech**_**. I swooned, not going to lie, but maybe that's because I was too close to editing Hiccup in scrubs. **

**Again, thank you all with sticking with me through this story (really these three stories), and I really, really appreciate it more than you can ever know. It's been a hell of a year. **

End
file.